"l o v e j o n e s"

a screenplay by
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first draft

NO DRAFT DATE

FADE IN:

MONTAGE (B&W)

The City and People of Chicago. King Pleasure's "I'm in the Mood for Love" PLAYS over.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY (COLOR)

Moving day. Taped-up boxes fill the entire space. A pile of clothes in the center of the room, furniture lumped together. We SEE a bright wedding dress sheathed in plastic and awaiting packing.

An attractive black woman, mid-twenties, stands alone at the window, impassively watching the rain fall outside. NINA MOSLEY. She's light-complected, athletic-looking. Something about her eyes -- a low flame constantly burns behind them, giving the impression she knows something you don't and isn't letting on.

She spots a nearby picture frame and picks it up.

INSERT - PHOTOGRAPH

A woman with her young son, maybe six or seven. The child is kissing his mother's face -- an expression of a pure love that demands nothing, delivers everything.

BACK TO SCENE

Nina stares at it a beat, tracing the lines with her finger.

NINA'S POV - WEDDING DRESS

At the top in an open box.

BACK TO SCENE

She tosses the picture rather unceremoniously into the box.

EXT. NINA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

It has stopped raining. JOSIE NICHOLS, mid-twenties, black, helps her load the stuff from her apartment into a Ryder truck. Both women are sweating from the exertion.

JOSIE
Where are the fellas when you need them?

NINA
Figures you'd break up with Robert the week before I have to move.

JOSIE
Hey, talk to him.

Nina shoots her a look.

NINA
Oh, yeah -- you had nothing to do with it.

Josie hefts a sizable box, ignoring her.

JOSIE
I mean... all we ask is a little sex on demand, hunt and gather the food...

NINA
Not even that.

JOSIE
Okay, sex on demand.

Nina drops a heavy box on the back of the truck.

NINA
And move the heavy shit. Now is that too much to ask?

JOSIE
Oh, yeah -- and that they keep their dicks in their pants.

Nina pauses to feign thoughtfulness.

NINA
Hmmm. Sex on demand, move the heavy shit, stay monogamous. No, no, that *is* too much to ask.

Josie laughs.

JOSIE
You give Marvin back the ring?

NINA
I would if I knew where the hell he was.

(MORE)

NINA (CONT'D)
I should keep it as a reminder to never make the same mistake twice.

JOSIE
Get engaged or fall in love?

Nina stops, thinks.

NINA
Fall in love -- the way I did. Believe me, that love-at-first-sight shit played out like the eight-track.

JOSIE
There you go. I'll make a cynic outta you yet.

We HEAR a microphone being jostled. A mercifully brief *FEEDBACK SPIKE* passes through the P.A. -- the audience responds disdainfully.

CUT TO:

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

The young black EMCEE steps into the harsh stage lighting and fiddles with the microphone. He sounds like Don Cornelius with strep.

EMCEE
(into mic)
This next brother's a member of the Old School. Y'all know who he is, and he's from the West Side, so put your hands together. Mr. Reggie Gibson.

Applause and scattered calls of "West Side!" and "West Side in da house!"

REGGIE GIBSON, black, late twenties, steps onstage and affectionately hugs the emcee. He addresses the mic, tugging on his left earlobe thoughtfully.

REGGIE
(into mic)
Uh, this is a new thing I worked out last night...

He nods at the percussionist, who begins to accompany him on a djembe drum. The rhythm is simple yet hypnotic.

REGGIE
(continuing; beat)
Hey! Nappy Head! / Hey! Shadow Girl! / Hey! Goddess of Darkness with kinks and curls / May I take a day and play in the heat of your kitchen? / Hey! Sister Cloud, Mother Earth, Star Child of my Universe / Can we love, can we *unite... can we forget how to* fight? / Can we love, mama? / May I nurture and care for the child within you, curled up in the corners of your soul / May I send you light and send you warmth / So you need never worry 'bout the night nor the cold / Hey, speak to me, Nappy Head, speak to me in non-words / Don't you dare talk to me in the tedious tone of tortuously taught and tangled tongues / Speak to me in dialect of divinity with your miracle of ritual and spiritual drum...

Let your voice and your words be the rhythms that are heard / Beyond Life, Beyond Breath, Beyond Grave, Beyond Death / Can we love, Nappy Head?

Reggie steps back from the mic as the audience applauds enthusiastically.

CUT TO:

DARIUS' TABLE

A long table in the back. We FIND the Rastafarian SAVON GARRISON, SHEILA DOWNES, Reggie Gibson, and the comedian of the crew known only by his nickname, HOLLYWOOD. The last person to come INTO VIEW is a handsome young brother, mid-twenties. He is smartly dressed, completely self-assured... perhaps somewhat trapped, even, by the coolness of his own presentation. DARIUS LOVEHALL.

The conversation continues AD LIB as Darius glances around the room.

DARIUS' POV - JOSIE

She sits by herself at a table.

BACK TO SCENE

DARIUS
(interrupting)
Who is that girl?

SAVON
Who?

DARIUS
Over there.

Everybody cranes their necks.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Oh, please, everybody look at once.

HOLLYWOOD
Josie Nichols. She used to date my cousin.

DARIUS
Brother, we might have to dialogue.

SAVON
She *is* fine.

HOLLYWOOD
(to Darius)
Gots no game, dude.

SHEILA
(to Savon)
Oh, Mr. Married Man over here...

SAVON
I'm married -- I ain't dead.

DARIUS
(to Hollywood)
I'm sorry, I thought you said I got no game.

REGGIE
Aw, shit...

HOLLYWOOD
That's what I said.

Darius narrows his eyes.

DARIUS
Don't you know who you're talkin' to, son?

SAVON
(grins)
Oh-oh, Mr. Cool Pose is about to tune up.

HOLLYWOOD
But babes see Mr. Cool Pose comin' a mile away.

Darius takes a dramatic slug from Wood's beer.

DARIUS
See, Wood tries to be slick and sneaky with his rap. At some point, he'll learn that shit don't work. I don't disguise my my game. She knows it's a rap, everybody at the table knows it's a rap, but it's performed so... *purely*, it becomes, like, a thing of beauty, you dig? Almost like, I don't know... *literature*.

Laughter. Wood cracks on him as he rises.

JOSIE'S TABLE

She is minding her business, about to light a cigarette... Darius appears, lighter in his outstretched hand. His voice drops about two octaves.

DARIUS
Allow me.

Josie is immediately put off by his glibness, but teases him nonetheless. She takes a drag, smiling up at him innocently. He continues on with the Billy Dee Williams routine, trying hard not to lay it on too thick.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Have I seen you down here before?

JOSIE
Maybe. I've seen you before, though.

DARIUS
Really.

JOSIE
(slyly)
Mmm-hmm. You write that nasty poetry.

He grins modestly. He sets his drink down to shake her hand.

DARIUS
And your name is...

Her attention shifts to someone behind him...

JOSIE
Hey, girl.

Darius turns around to face --

Nina. He immediately knocks his drink over, splashing the table. Their eyes lock and he is totally floored, all the cool running out in a gush. She is attracted as well, amused by his clumsiness, but tries hard not to show it.

NINA
Uh, hi.

DARIUS
Hi.

Darius, still struggling with his composure, tries o flag a waitress. Josie also watches with amusement.

JOSIE
This is, uh --

DARIUS
Darius. Lovehall.

NINA
Nina Mosley.

They shake hands.

DARIUS' TABLE

They all watch closely, completely entertained.

SHEILA
Fumble...

HOLLYWOOD
No, no, that was masterful.

EMCEE

He strides onstage with a clipboard and signals for the house lights to go back down. He consults his list.

EMCEE
(into mic)
All right, a treat for the ladies. This next cat on the mic is my ace. He's a regular, and for those that don't know, he writes a feature column for the Chicago *Weekly*.

Darius looks up.

EMCEE
(continuing; into mic)
Give it up for Mr. Darius Lovehall.

Applause from the room. Darius composes himself, back in his element. He glances from Nina to the stage and back, a thought occurring to him.

DARIUS
Uh, excuse me...

Nina sits down. Darius motions for a young tenor saxophonist to join him. We FOLLOW Darius as he makes his way to the stage. He gives the emcee a warm hug and steps to the mic.

DARIUS
(continuing; into mic)
This is a little something new. It's called, uh... "Blues for Nina."

She arches an eyebrow. INTERCUT her reactions with his performance. The saxophonist plays fluid blues and [illegible] lines behind him

DARIUS
(continuing; into mic)
How gently does the violence of our hips colliding blanket expletives from the twisted dry-lipped circle / Shhh... listen to the aquamantric sounds our members have created with the wetness which awaited our union / Shhh... Listen to the mist in your eyes as they cry the silent tears of hidden rage, hidden passion, hidden fear / Now sob those feelings into receptively willing shoulders...

How gently does the delicate muse of bleeding and sweating and the letting of petting... of raving, of ranting, of vowel sounds merging with heart pounds and panting... allow the completion of the *ménage à trois* -- you and I and the spirit of the Most High... Yes, the Ancestors may watch / Yes, the Ancestors may join / No, They mustn't speak / This time They must remain silent in the presence of creation / Oh, but to suffer the ecstasy of long awaited agony / Rhythms and cataclysms... how gentle the violence of our colliding hips / How excruciatingly... narcotic.

He smiles and steps away from the mic as the audience applauds. He shakes hands with his ~~accompanist~~. The emcee returns.

EMCEE
(into mic)
Darius Lovehall.
(beat; laughs)
Where is this Nina at?

Darius walks off the stage, winking at Nina, who shoots him a look in return.

DARIUS' TABLE

SHEILA
[illegible] give him props for that.
[illegible]

He makes a dismissive gesture.

HOLLYWOOD
Yeah, yeah, yeah...

JOSIE'S TABLE

Nina is slightly embarrassed. Josie leans over.

JOSIE
"Played out like an eight-track."
You did say that, right?

Nina tries to ignore her.

JOSIE
(continuing)
But can he move the heavy shit?

Nina rolls her eyes

JOSIE
(continuing)
That man can collide with *my* hips.

DARIUS

He sits back down. The rest of the table riffs AD LIB, but he is lost in his own thoughts.

DARIUS' POV

He SEES Nina across the room, head turned slightly, talking to Josie.

BACK TO SCENE

He pulls at his chin thoughtfully.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. STREET - LATER

Darius and his friends all stand in front of the club AD LIBBING conversation. Nina walks up to them, stopping everything.

NINA
(to Darius)
Thanks for my poem. It was...

Darius looks at her.

DARIUS
You're welcome.
(introducing her)
This is Nina, everybody.
(pointing)
Savon, Sheila, Reggie, and Hollywood.

They all offer greetings and Nina smiles in return. Josie wanders over, greetings are made.

DARIUS
(continuing; to Nina)
Next week you can write one for me.

NINA
Maybe. But it won't be about sex.

HOLLYWOOD
What's wrong with sex?

NINA
Nothing. But there's other topics.

DARIUS
Like what?

She reaches over and plucks the pen from Darius' pocket. She takes his hand, turning it over.

CLOSEUP ON DARIUS' HAND

In small, neat print, Nina writes the word "love" on the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger.

BACK TO SCENE

Hollywood shoots him a look as Nina returns the pen to his pocket. Sheila, Savon, and Reggie look at him expectantly, anticipating the smooth response, but the master of words is momentarily caught with nothing to say.

NINA
(teasing)
But you probably wouldn't know nothing about that.

Nina turns and walks away.

Josie makes a face, knowing there's nothing left to say, and follows her. Everyone watches them walk up the street. Wood says it best --

HOLLYWOOD
Damn.

Laughter. Darius says nothing.

REGGIE
The girl's too light for me, man. I need a *real* black woman.

The light-complected Savon chimes in good-naturedly.

SAVON
Why you talkin' 'bout us light-skinned folks, man?

REGGIE
The Cotton Club days of you yella muthafuckas is over. Time for *the return of Darkman, goddamnit*.

HOLLYWOOD
She ain't that light, Reg.

REGGIE
Brother, she's made of *glass*.

Everyone except Darius laughs. He stares at the retreating figures thoughtfully as the others continue riffing AD LIB. Off his look --

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ~~PHOTOGRAPHY~~ STUDIO - DAY - NINA

A huge converted loft. We SEE Nina prepping about a dozen cameras stretched out on a huge table in the back. The ~~photographer~~, ROGER LIEVSAY, is shooting a Cindy Crawford wannabe in front of a white drop. Lievsay is British, late thirties, and totally crazed. Assistants, stylists, and other "fabulous people" hang out, watching.

LIEVSAY
Yes, yes... more of that, yes, more, bigger... no... oh, yes, yes... no, twist your arse more towards lens, dear... yes, absolutely stunning...

He stops, holding the empty Rolleiflex in his outstretched hand. Nina runs up and replaces it. Lievsay looks at her hard.

LIEVSAY
(continuing)
I said the bloody Hasselblad.

NINA
Roger, you said the Mamiya.

The room has come to a dead stop to watch this exchange. Lievsay takes a breath.

LIEVSAY
I know what I asked for --

Nina tries to remain pleasant.

NINA
(interrupting)
You always go from the Rollie to the Mamiya.

LIEVSAY
Goddamnit! My rhythm is broken. Ten! Everybody take ten.

The crowd disperses, begins chatting. Nina glances around, embarrassed.

NINA
Uh, can I... get you anything?

Lievsay thinks for a beat, then answers definitively.

LIEVSAY
I must have a turkey sandwich immediately.

He hands her a twenty.

LIEVSAY
(continuing)
On rye, with lots of mayo. And you must go to the place --

NINA
(interrupting)
On Eleventh Street. Yeah, yeah...

Nina looks around for one of the assistants -- everyone keeps on walking right by her.

She taps somebody, but is blown off. Finally, Lievsay speaks up.

LIEVSAY
Nina. I want you to go.

Nina looks at him, trying real hard to contain herself.

LIEVSAY
(continuing)
And try to bring the right sandwich, will you?

She turns and exits. Lievsay turns to the model.

LIEVSAY
(continuing)
Come here to me, my love...

INT. ELEVENTH STREET DELI - DAY

Nina enters and approaches the counter. The guy behind the counter holds up one finger -- "just a minute." Nina glances around.

NINA'S POV - DARIUS

He sits in the back talking to Reggie, oblivious.

BACK TO SCENE

Nina panics for a brief second, then slips back outside without him ever seeing her.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - DAY

Nina hands Lievsay the wrapped sandwich.

NINA
(fumbling)
Uh, Eleventh Street was closed. Sorry. I guess it's... a Jewish holiday?

Lievsay puts the sandwich down and exhales dramatically.

NINA
(continuing)
Gimme a break, Roger. It's just a sandwich.

LIEVSAY
This isn't about the bloody sandwich, Nina.
(beat)
I don't think this is working out.

NINA
(a look)
How can you say that? I'm good. I got all this gear *cold*. You know that.

LIEVSAY
Yes, you know the equipment better than anyone -- but there's more...
(beat)
Perhaps you'd be better off on your own.

Nina is in disbelief.

NINA
Hold up. I wanna get this straight. You're firing me because I brought the wrong sandwich?

LIEVSAY
Don't look at it as a termination. Look at it as... an opportunity.

Off her look --

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

The phone RINGS, she scoops it up.

NINA
(into phone)
Hello?

DONOVAN (V.O.)
Nina? Hey, it's me.

NINA
(into phone)
Donovan. Tell me somethin' good, baby.

DONOVAN (V.O.)
Sorry. I got all my acts covered this month.

NINA
(into phone)
How come you only call me to shoot the black acts? You got a white band I can shoot? You got an alternative band I can shoot? You got a white-alternative-grunge-country/western band? I'll shoot *them*.

DONOVAN (V.O.)
Is this about money? I thought you were working for Roger Lievsay.

She makes a face.

NINA
(into phone)
Was. We had some, uh, creative differences.

DONOVAN (V.O.)
You let *Roger Lievsay* fire you? At least you're in good company.

NINA
(smiles; into phone)
Just tell me you have something.

DONOVAN (V.O.)
Uh, there's the road. Tommy always needs tour photographers...

Nina pauses, looking out the window.

NINA
(into phone)
No... I don't think I can leave town right now...

DONOVAN (V.O.)
Tell me what you want.

NINA
I just want to get my thing on, man, that's all.
(MORE)

NINA (CONT'D)
I want to be in a situation where I can do what I do. And shooting fifteen-year-old rappers isn't getting it.

DONOVAN (V.O.)
I tell you what. Let me call a friend of mine in New York -- no promises, but I'll see what's up.

NINA
(into phone)
Thanks, D. I appreciate it.

She hangs up, dejected. Nina takes a beat to consider her situation, exhaling heavily.

We FOLLOW her across the room to the stereo. She pops a tape in, hits play, then drops herself on the couch. She takes a sip of wine as we HEAR the Isley Brothers' "Make Me Say it Again, Girl" come through the speakers. Nina tries to unwind, enjoying the music, then...

Ronald Isley's voice drops about four octaves, grinding down. Then gurgling, then silence. Nina curses and goes to the stereo, withdrawing the mangled tape. She shakes her head, wondering if anything else can go wrong today.

EXT. RECORD STORE - DAY

A big sign across the front: "OLD SCHOOL FOOL". Nina walks up and ducks inside.

INT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL

Empty. Nina enters and recognizes Sheila, behind the counter, reading a newspaper. We HEAR *Kind of Blue*-era Miles Davis wafting quietly from unseen speakers.

NINA
Hi... Sheila, right?

SHEILA
(surprised)
Oh, hey! What's up?

NINA
Girl, I need a Isley Brothers tape bad.

SHEILA
(smiles)
Tapes are over in the back.

Nina smiles and goes over, searching the racks.

INT. CHICAGO *WEEKLY* OFFICE - DAY

A small but typical newsroom -- buzzing with commotion. We FIND Darius at his desk, emptying a few personal effects into a backpack. A young white colleague, BRAD, appears.

BRAD
Got tired of deadlines and Alverson's shit, huh?

Darius continues packing.

DARIUS
Time to flip the script, that's all. Evolution, man. Can't stay in one place too long.

BRAD
(nods)
Any plans?

DARIUS
I'm writing a novel.

BRAD
Well, we chipped in and got you a little something every writer should have.

Darius makes a face, beginning to admonish him, but stops after Brad tosses him a bottle of Liquid Paper. Darius smiles.

BRAD
(continuing)
Hey, good luck.

DARIUS
Thanks, man.

He zips up his bag and hauls it over his shoulder.

They shake hands and Darius exits.

EXT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL - DAY

Darius pulls up on his motorcycle and goes inside.

INT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL

Sheila sees him enter and smiles to herself. Nina, her back to the door, is at a listening station with headphones on.

DARIUS
Slow up in here, baby.

She nods at Nina in the back.

SHEILA
Oh, it's about to speed up.

CLOSE - DARIUS

Caught way off-guard.

DARIUS
Oh, shit...

Sheila chuckles. We FOLLOW him over. He taps Nina's shoulder, surprising her. She pulls the phones off, not knowing quite how to react. The tension between them is palpable.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Hi.

NINA
Uh, hi. Darius, right?

Darius nods. He spots the CD case in her hand.

DARIUS
Al Green. Can't go wrong there.

Both are excited and nervous, and both struggle to keep cool.

NINA
Uh-huh.

DARIUS
Can I play you something else? I want you to hear something.

NINA
(smiles)
I don't know. Last time you had an impulse, you embarrassed the shit out of me.

DARIUS
Oh, this'll be easy.

She looks at him skeptically. He grins and selects a record from a nearby rack. Darius goes over to the counter and hands it to Sheila.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Track seven.

He jogs back to her. She is waiting for him with her arms folded and an eyebrow cocked. Darius taps his ear with his index finger -- "listen." Soon we HEAR Bird's "Parker's Mood" sailing gently through the store. The record remains elegiac and achingly beautiful -- pops, scratches, and all. Nina smiles -- not out of recognition, but because she's impressed.

NINA
Charlie Parker. I've never heard this, though.

Darius makes a face, impressed.

DARIUS
You know the music.

She looks at him like he's stupid.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Such a... sad piece of music, isn't it? He was in a lot of pain when he recorded this -- heroin, ulcers... almost like he heard his own death and played it.

She wrinkles her nose.

NINA
Melancholy, maybe... but not sad.
(chastising him playfully)
I mean, what you said was very poetic, but it wasn't musical reality.

Darius lifts an eyebrow, enjoying this.

DARIUS
Oh, really?

NINA
Listen to what he plays. Bebop is totally melodic, man, lyrical -- it's not just odd notes. It's about resolving tensions.

DARIUS
(genuinely)
I never thought of it that way.

She smiles slyly.

NINA
Just thought I'd break you off a little somethin'. But you do have good taste.

She exits for the counter. Darius watches her for a beat, smiling to himself, then goes after her.

CUT TO:

NINA/DARIUS - TWO SHOT

They are at the counter. Nina is writing a check for a bag of tapes and CD's. She hands the check to Sheila.

SHEILA
Sorry we didn't have the one you wanted.

NINA
It's okay. Thanks.
(to Darius; politely)
'Bye.

She walks towards the door, but he stops her.

DARIUS
So... maybe we could have a drink sometime.

The inevitable. Nina takes a long beat.

NINA
I don't think that would be a good idea.

DARIUS
Why not?

NINA
It's just... bad timing. Nothing personal.

He watches her go, saying nothing.

EXT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL - NINA

She exits the store. Nina stops and throws a look back over her shoulder, as if she wants to change her mind, but decides to continue on instead.

INT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL

Darius shakes his head.

DARIUS
Well, I fucked *that* up.

SHEILA
When will you brothers learn? You *move* too fast. Women like to go slow and easy. Didn't I school you?

He brightens, getting an idea.

DARIUS
You gotta give me her address.

SHEILA
How would I do that?

DARIUS
It's on the check.

SHEILA
Why would I do that?

DARIUS
'Cause you're my girl.

SHEILA
Hell, no.

DARIUS
C'mon, Sheila. Hook me up.

Sheila exhales slowly.

SHEILA
I would, but I can't open the drawer till I make a sale.

Darius looks around -- the joint is deserted.

DARIUS
Man, I can't believe this...

SHEILA
Nigga, *buy* something!

DARIUS
I don't have any money on me.

SHEILA
Guess you just assed-out, then, huh?

DISSOLVE TO:

DARIUS - LATER

He spots a lone brother entering the store and perks up. The CUSTOMER starts browsing, in no particular hurry. Darius goes up to him, trailing him through the store. They go on like that for a few beats -- Darius stalking *the customer, him wondering what the fuck's wrong with* Darius. Finally, he jumps bad --

CUSTOMER
(hot)
Why you sweatin' me, kid? What's up?

Darius launches into his sales pitch.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT

Nina is on the couch with the paper.

We SEE that she is going through the classifieds, circling job possibilities. A few KNOCKS on the door. Frowning, she gets up, and we FOLLOW her to the door.

She peers through the peephole and is shocked to see Darius. She opens the door to the length of the chain.

NINA
What are you doing here? How did you know where I live?

DARIUS
I'm sorry to come unannounced, but --

NINA
(interrupting)
How did you know where I live?

DARIUS
(lying)
I read your address over your shoulder when you made out your check -- look, I'm sorry. I know that wasn't exactly playing fair, but... well, I found the CD you were looking for.

He pushes it through the crack.

DARIUS
(continuing)
The Isley Brothers, right?

She takes it, looking at him a long beat. Against her better judgement, she unhooks the chain and opens the door.

NINA
(quietly)
Thanks. Come in.

He enters cautiously, minding his manners. He follows her into the front room, looking around.

DARIUS
This crib is phat.

NINA
Look... why'd you come here? After I turned you down at the store, why'd you come?

DARIUS
Calculated risk.

NINA
You in the habit of taking chances?

DARIUS
(shrugs)
You said it was bad timing... I figured if I asked again, maybe you'd say yes. And if not that time, then maybe the next time -- until the next time became the right time.

She smiles faintly, thawing out just a few degrees. He spots a series of black-and-white prints spread out on the dining table. He looks through them casually.

INSERT - PHOTOGRAPHS

Mostly pictures of men -- some posed, some caught Doisneau-style on the street, oblivious to the camera. A wide range of emotions is depicted: joy, anger, despair, elation, melancholy. We also SEE some of the shots that comprise the montage at the beginning of the film. He motions at the pictures.

DARIUS
A photographer.

She nods. He's clearly impressed.

NINA
You know anything about photography?

DARIUS
Oh, a little somethin'-somethin'. Sorta reminds me of the stuff Gordon Parks was shooting for *Look* magazine.

Now she's impressed.

DARIUS
(continuing)
But why all the dudes?

NINA
(shrugs)
I like men. It's my way of trying to figure you all out.

DARIUS
Oh, we're pretty easy to figure out.

NINA
Besides... you'll never be able to photograph the soul of a woman.

DARIUS
But *you* can capture the soul of a man, huh?

She takes a pregnant pause and smiles, enjoying their proximity.

NINA
We'll just have to see.

DARIUS
(beat)
Can I ask you a question?

NINA
You sure this is the right time?

DARIUS
(smiles)
Some partners of mine are having a little get-together tomorrow night. I'd love for you to come with me.

She looks at him, considering.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Don't make me have to bring some more CD's up in here, now. 'Cause I'll start buying you Prince CD's -- and you know that nigga puts out two records a year. *Eventually* you'll say yes.

NINA
(chuckles)
I'll save you the trouble. Yes.

DARIUS
Cool.

NINA
Call me tomorrow...
(mock attitude)
...'cause I *know* you wrote down my phone number.

CUT TO:

EXT. LAKE SHORE DRIVE - NIGHT

Darius and Nina whiz by on his bike.

INT. SAVON'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Savon opens the door to reveal Darius and Nina. The two men exchange some dap and a discreet glance as Darius passes by.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER

The whole posse is present: Reggie, Wood, Sheila, and Savon's pretty wife TROY. Their seven-year-old son *JAMAL rampages through the room with boundless energy* until he is snapped up by his mother. They all sit around on the floor or on the couch drinking beer, smoking, munching on snacks, laughing, and talking shit.

Sheila spots a fertility drum on the coffee table and grabs it.

SHEILA
(to Troy)
Where'd you get this?

TROY
The fertility drum? At the bookstore in Harper Square.

SAVON
I told her we don't need no more fertility.

Laughter. Sheila jumps up and does an impromptu fertility dance for the benefit of the men.

REGGIE
(laughing)
Don't mess around with those spirits, girl.

She dances by him, spinning the drum between her hands.

SHEILA
What's wrong, Reg?

REGGIE
See, you'll fuck up and have every woman in this room pregnant.

Laughter.

DARIUS
(grins)
Probably get the wrong spirit and have *us* pregnant.

Sheila drops back on the floor.

SHEILA
She wouldn't do us like that.

HOLLYWOOD
She who?

SHEILA
God. God's a woman, you know.

TROY
God's a *sista*.

The woman laugh, signify.

DARIUS
No, no, it's true. God is a woman.

HOLLYWOOD
How do you know what God is, muthafucka?

DARIUS
Well... if you've ever chased a woman, you would know that women are imbued with a certain... power, mystique that renders men incapable of functioning -- drives men to the point of distraction.

SAVON
(chuckles)
Destruction.

DARIUS
Okay, the point of destruction. A male god would never allow a creature made in His own image get jammed up like that.

Sheila throws him some attitude.

SHEILA
Don't be tryin' to impress your date. We know you don't believe that shit.

They all laugh, including Nina, who looks at him skeptically.

DARIUS
I'm serious!
(laughing)
All right, forget y'all.

SAVON
Hold up, hold up, I'll go one better. A man gets a hard-on. You know where the blood comes from, right?

They look at him expectantly.

SAVON
(continuing)
His brain and his feet. So, a) you're stupid, and b) you can't run. Only a woman god would think of some shit like that.

Laughter.

HOLLYWOOD
No, see, that's bullshit, and I'll tell you why: anatomy. 'Cause if God were a woman, She'd have put the dick under the chin.

The room erupts into cackles.

CUT TO:

DARIUS/NINA - TWO SHOT

She whispers something in his ear that makes him laugh.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Darius and Nina stroll easily down the street. It is *apparent that they are warming up to each other.*

NINA
So... how long have you been writing that nasty poetry?

DARIUS
It's not that nasty. Do you write? Poetry.

NINA
"I gather up each sound you left behind and stretch them on our bed / Each night I breathe you and become high."

Darius becomes intrigued.

DARIUS
Yours?

NINA
(shakes her head)
Sanchez. Lifelong fan. She makes me wanna burn my notebook.

DARIUS
It ain't about reaching her level. It's about reaching yours.

She nudges him playfully.

NINA
Got all the answers, don't you?

DARIUS
Naw, baby. Just the questions.

She pauses, then cracks an appreciative grin.

NINA
It's cool. I think cockiness suits a black man.
(ruefully)
Some black men, anyway.

A thought occurs to Darius.

DARIUS
Hey. You like reggae?

NINA
Of course.

DARIUS
C'mon. I wanna see you dance. Tonight.

NINA
I don't know...

DARIUS
Oh, I get it -- you a little shy 'cause you can't dance. Naw, that's cool. A lot of black people can't dance...

She stops and looks at him, clearly accepting his challenge.

INT. WILD HARE - NIGHT

Sensuous, hip-grinding MUSIC blasts from the club's P.A. Dozens of hot, sweaty bodies are packed into the joint, swaying to the hypnotic rhythms from the house band.

In SLOW-MOTION, 36-48 FPS, we FIND Nina in the center of the crowded floor. She's an awesome dancer, and Darius doesn't dance so much as watch, totally faced. Soon they are dancing close, gyrating in time with one another, both utterly transfixed by the deep island groove.

EXT. NINA'S BUILDING - NIGHT

He walks her to the front door. The tension is palpable.

NINA
Well... thank you.

DARIUS
(nods)
Sure.

They stare at each other for a beat, not quite knowing how to go...

then a mutual impulse seizes them, and they suddenly find themselves in a passionate clinch, kissing deeply. Nina catches herself, breaking away.

NINA
Hey, this is moving a bit fast. I don't even know you...

DARIUS
(quickly)
You're right. I should go.

NINA
I mean, I had a great time, but I just can't roll like that on a first date.

DARIUS
I understand.

They kiss again, fiercely. Darius takes a step back.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Goodnight.

NINA
Goodnight.

Finally resigned to depart, he turns and walks away. Halfway to the curb he looks back to Nina, who still watches from the door. Off her look --

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nina and Darius are groping at each other madly, barely inside the apartment. He kicks the door shut with his foot, stumbling. Furnishings crash to the floor, but they stop for nothing.

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Nina is asleep on the bed. She stirs, awakening slowly. Thinking Darius is gone, she drags herself out of bed.

INT. FRONT ROOM

She straggles out of the bedroom half-naked and looking

DARIUS
Good morning.

He is setting some food down on the table. She blinks, surprised.

NINA
Good morning.

DARIUS
You okay?

She rubs her temples.

NINA
My head feels like it's in a vice.

She starts self-consciously retrieving garments of hers that apparently had been thrown about the room hastily. Obviously somewhat uncomfortable, she hasn't decided whether she wants him to stay. Darius notices.

DARIUS
Hey, look, about last night... I really dig you. I hope we didn't move too fast.

NINA
Nothing happened I didn't want to happen.

DARIUS
(beat)
Is that good or bad? I mean, is that what "happened" you regret, or is that what "happened," the shit was cool?

NINA
(smiles)
The shit was cool.

DARIUS
So we can hook up again, right?

She nods.

DARIUS
(continuing)
You not gonna fake?

She shakes her head. Darius is clearly making a point of assuaging what he thinks are her potential anxieties.

She gives up on the bras and panties and sits down at the table.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Good, 'cause I hate it when you sleep with a woman and she dogs you out -- you know, doesn't return your phone calls, plays you off in front of her girls --

She smacks his shoulder playfully.

NINA
All right, all right, I get the point.
(beat)
Just so you know this ain't usually my style. I don't want you to think I'm, like, a 'ho or anything...

He looks at her innocently.

DARIUS
Why? 'Cause you gave it up on the first date?
(mock seriousness)
No, no, I would never think that.

She smacks him again and they share a laugh.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Don't hit me. I like that shit.

She gives him a look.

EXT. LAKE SHORE DRIVE - DAY

We are FOLLOWING Josie's Sentra through midday traffic.

JOSIE (V.O.)
(slyly)
So whatcha gonna do, girl? You gonna have him or what?

INT. CAR (MOVING)

Nina reacts quirkily...

NINA
Are you kidding? I'd hurt that boy.

Josie takes a long pause, keeping her eyes on Nina.

JOSIE
You fucked him, didn't you?

Nina tries, but can't hold back. She nods.

JOSIE
(continuing)
You ain't slick! I can't believe you fucked him and you weren't even gonna tell your girl!

With the cat out of the bag, Nina warms to the recollection.

NINA
(firm)
The man wears sex like a coat.

JOSIE
(mock outrage)
I can't *believe* you fucked him on the first date!
(beat; grins)
'Ho.

Nina smacks her shoulder and they both crack up.

NINA
It just happened, you know, I didn't *plan* to sleep with him. You know that's not my style.

Josie isn't buying.

JOSIE
Yeah, you just sorta slipped and fell on his dick, right?

NINA
Yeah.

They both crack up.

JOSIE
Break it down -- I want *all* the dirt. How [illegible] long, how strong [illegible]

NINA
Girl, I can't tell you... we just clicked, instantly. We went dancing, we --

JOSIE
(interrupting)
Fuck the date. What about the sex? That's what *I'm* talkin' about.

NINA
Listen to you.

JOSIE
I have to live vicariously through your sex life.

NINA
I can't even describe it. It was like... his dick *talked* to me.

Josie takes a beat, looking at her expectantly.

JOSIE
What'd it say?

NINA
(long beat)
Nina.

JOSIE
(wistful)
Damn.
(beat)
At least you're movin' on -- I thought you'd never get over that wedding disaster.

Nina winces -- maybe she isn't over it.

NINA
Yeah, well, that little episode with Marvin is definitely black history... anyway, Darius and me are just kickin' it. This ain't a love thing yet.

Josie cuts her eyes at Nina.

JOSIE
Uh-huh.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

We FOLLOW Darius heading down the hallway outside of Savon's apartment with a basketball. Savon and Troy are arguing low in b.g. and o.s. Suddenly the door comes flying open, Troy storms out, dragging Jamal with her. She and Darius exchange an awkward look before she disappears down the hall with her son in tow. Savon pokes his head out.

SAVON
Come back here! C'mon, now!

TROY
(over her shoulder)
Forget you, Savon. I'm so tired of your bullshit.

Darius looks at Savon.

DARIUS
The Odd Couple's at it again.

SAVON
I think it's for real this time, D.

DARIUS
You've been married for five years; you've known her for eight. You all put too much time in for it not to work out.

SAVON
I just don't know, man. We're going in different directions. I don't think we have anything in common anymore.

DARIUS
(beat)
You still wanna ball?

Savon thinks about it for a beat.

SAVON
Yeah. I do.

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

Savon and Darius are shooting [illegible] court, working up a sweat.

DARIUS
Lemme ask you a question, man. *Do you honestly think you married* the woman you're supposed to be with?

SAVON
The question implies that there's only one woman you're supposed to be with -- or, if you're a woman, one man. I ain't convinced of that.

DARIUS
Just answer the question.

SAVON
So you mean, did I marry my soulmate?

DARIUS
Yeah.

SAVON
(beat)
Depends which day you ask me.

DARIUS
Dig it.

SAVON
Don't really matter, you know? You're with who you're with. Just gotta try and make it work.

DARIUS
I guess.

SAVON
Is this about that girl? What's *her name -- Nina?*

DARIUS
God*damn*. Homegirl worked some straight *voodoo* shit on my ass. Dog, I was speaking in tongues, *no bullshit. I ain't gonna* lie -- she turned me the fuck out. Next morning had me runnin' around the crib like a dog, sniffin' my clothes, trying to pick up her scent.

SAVON
(laughs)
Said she fucked you up, huh?

DARIUS
That girl can *throw*. I *believe... yes, she is the* baddest of all time.

Savon sets a shot from the free-throw line.

SAVON
When that jones comes down, it's a muthafucka.

DARIUS
You ain't lied. But this ain't no love thing, you know. We're just kickin' it.

SAVON
Whatever you say, partner.

He shoots. WHOOSH. Darius just makes a face.

EXT. STREET - DAY

Darius and Nina are across the street from his building. The postman is walking towards the door with the day's mail. Just before he reaches the door, though, three kids from the neighborhood come racing around the corner. They sail past him, snatching the mail out of his hand. Laughing and taunting him from over their shoulders, they disappear into an alley.

NINA
That's terrible!

Darius is laughing his ass off.

DARIUS
That shit was funny as hell!

The postman, too old to follow, shrugs and turns back to his truck.

NINA
What about those people's mail?

DARIUS
Ain't nothin' but some damn bills. I hope my shit was in that stack.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

Nina pulls an ancient Nikon off the bookshelf.

NINA
Damn. Is this the kind where the little bird chisels the picture with his beak?

DARIUS
Yeah, yeah, yeah...

NINA
You got any film for this?

DARIUS
Should be a roll over there somewhere.

She finds a roll and begins loading the camera. Darius discreetly takes a small framed photograph of a black woman from his desktop and slips it in a drawer. Nina turns around, focusing the lens.

DARIUS
(continuing)
My fashion spread, right?

NINA
Just be natural.

She CLICKS through a few frames. He starts hamming it up, performing "Ebony Man"-type poses while she snaps away, both laughing.

NINA
(continuing)
I said natural, fool.
(beat)
Take off your clothes.

He stops. She CLICKS.

DARIUS
Excuse me?

NINA
Take off your clothes.

He looks at her for a long beat. She continues shooting.

DARIUS
I'm camera shy.

NINA
I've seen what you've got. C'mon.

He pauses again, uncomfortable, but totally intrigued with her. He slips out of his shirt. CLICK.

DARIUS
How do I know this shit won't turn up in your book... a magazine, or something?

NINA
Strictly for my private collection. Go on.

CLICK. Off comes the T-shirt. CLICK. He starts undoing his pants, but stops. She looks at him.

NINA
(continuing)
You don't trust me?

He tries to figure out how to answer the question tactfully, but his panicked look says everything. He takes the camera from her and sets it down, drawing her closer.

DARIUS
(beat)
So are all the men in your life just in the pictures?

She shrugs coyly.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Design or circumstance?

NINA
(beat)
Little bit of both.

He brushes her cheek lightly with the tips of his fingers.

DARIUS
Tell me.

His hand on her skin starts to feel good. She gets impatient with the conversation.

NINA
Oh, you've heard it before: naive young girl, selfish man, pain, agony, blase-blah. Can't tell you all my secrets, now can I?

DARIUS
It gets pretty lonely when you don't.

She leans forward, presses a finger to his lips.

NINA
Sshh. I'll tell you all about it.
(beat)
But not tonight.

She kisses him softly.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

She swings the front door open to reveal MARVIN COX, an attractive brother about her age. He smiles slyly.

MARVIN
Hey, baby.

All the emotions and memories come forward. Nina is at once shocked, surprised, elated, pissed, and angry --

NINA
Marvin.

CUT TO:

NINA/MARVIN

Now seated at the table. Marvin takes a long drag from a beer, looking around.

MARVIN
My apartment wasn't good enough for you, huh?

NINA
How was I supposed to stay there?

This is obviously awkward for both of them. He takes a beat, trying to think of small talk to make.

MARVIN
You still shooting?

NINA
Of course I'm still shooting. What the hell else would I be doing?
(growing impatient)
Uh, can I help you with something?

MARVIN
You don't have to be like that.

NINA
You left *me*. I can be any way I want.

His expression changes -- pained, almost ashamed.

MARVIN
We left each other.

She smiles to herself.

NINA
Boy, that memory's a funny thing, isn't it?

Marvin takes a deep breath, goes into his rap.

MARVIN
Look. I'm in New York, I'm doing real well. Things are... well, different now. I'm different.

NINA
If this is the part where you try to get back, we can skip it.

MARVIN
Here me out, now. I know I made some mistakes... I, I just...
(beat)
Shit. You know I'm no good at this shit. I'm no good with words. Look, I got you something.

He takes a ticket folder out of his pocket and slides it across the table.

MARVIN
(continuing)
Bing.

NINA
What's this?

MARVIN
Train ticket. To New York. I want you to come stay with me, baby. I want us to try again.

The emotions play across her face. She deeply wishes she was somewhere else at this moment.

NINA
Oh, Marvin... how you gonna just show up and do this shit to me? I can't go to New York now.

MARVIN
Are you working? Are you... are you seeing somebody?

She doesn't respond. He takes her hand, kneeling in front of her.

MARVIN
(continuing)
I love you. I know you love me. Just think about it. You owe me that -- we got too much history.

He gets up, snatches his jacket.

MARVIN
(continuing)
I mean, what's keeping you here?
(beat)
I gotta go.

He kisses her cheek softly and exits. Off her look --

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - MORNING - NINA

Nina is at her dressing table applying make-up. Darius watches her from the bed, totally transfixed. She catches his eye in the mirror's reflection and smiles.

NINA
Whatcha lookin' at, baby?

DARIUS
You know you're incredibly beautiful. I mean, *crushing*.

NINA
(laughs)
You go, boy.

DARIUS
I'm serious.

She pauses, appreciating his sincerity.

NINA
Careful. People fall in love behind words like that.

DARIUS
(softly)
Yeah. I know.

She looks at him skeptically for a beat. Darius senses something's up.

DARIUS
(continuing)
What?

She thinks about Marvin... a beat, then she manages a half-smile.

NINA
Nothing.

EXT. HAROLD WASHINGTON PARK - DAY - NINA

Darius and Nina are walking along. Nina wears a concerned expression.

NINA
... I'm going away. In a couple of weeks.

DARIUS
Where?

NINA
(bent)
No. Yuck.

DARIUS
For how long?

NINA
Uh, I don't know. For awhile.

DARIUS
Why?

She looks at him, genuinely wanting to be honest.

NINA
There's a guy. We used to be... in a relationship. I haven't seen him in while.

Darius clenches his jaws as discreetly as he can, trying to remain cool.

DARIUS
Are you in love with him?

She answers just a bit too quickly --

NINA
No. I mean, I just... want to see him, that's all. We were close, once.

Darius is hurt, but doesn't quite know how to react.

NINA
(continuing)
I'm telling you this because I like you a lot -- I don't think it's fair to be dishonest with you.

DARIUS
Well, I, uh... appreciate your honesty. I mean, we're just kickin' it, right? I ain't got no papers on you.

NINA
Yeah. That's right. So you not mad?

DARIUS
Don't trip. What I got to be mad about?

INT. TIKI ROOM - NIGHT

Tacky South Side cocktail lounge. Savon and Darius are at a corner table drinking beer. Darius is pissed, in the middle of a rant.

DARIUS
Yo, you believe that shit?

Savon, being his boy, is naturally put in the position of having to agree with everything he says.

SAVON
That's out, man.

DARIUS
I mean, if the nigga was doin' the job in the first place, why am I on it?

SAVON
I'm hip.

DARIUS
I mean, this shit don't happen to The Kid, right?

SAVON
Not The Kid.

DARIUS
I *steal*, you dig? I don't *get* stole on. And her.
(snorts)
These women, man, they're killing me.

SAVON
Well, you know, that's how it goes sometimes. But I thought you all were just, you know, having fun.

DARIUS
That ain't the point.

SAVON
What's the point?

DARIUS
I'll tell you what the point is. The point is...
(MORE)

DARIUS (CONT'D)
(beat)
I'm mad. That's the point.

Savon smiles, taking a drag from his beer.

DARIUS
(continuing)
It wouldn't be so bad if... I mean, I think she's the one, man.

Savon narrows his eyes, considering who he's talking to.

SAVON
The one?

DARIUS
Yeah. I think.

Darius holds his sincere expression for another beat, then they both explode into laughter.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Psyche!

SAVON
Man, go get some more beer.

Darius takes the empty pitcher and we FOLLOW him to the bar. Waiting for it to be refilled, he takes a look around the room.

DARIUS' POV

A striking black woman, about his age, sitting at a table with her girlfriends, laughing. VERONICA MARTIN. He catches her eye.

CLOSE - DARIUS

He smiles.

DARIUS' POV

Smiling slightly, she turns away.

INT. DARKROOM - DAY

The safelight glows red. Nina hovers over the soup watching a photograph come to life.

INSERT - DEVELOPING TRAY

Darius materializes on the paper -- from the candids she took in his apartment. Not a clowning pose, but exposed the instant she asked him to strip. His expression is vulnerable, insecure -- and far more naked than if he had no clothes on at all.

BACK TO SCENE

Nina stares at it a beat longer before lowering her eyes.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Nina squats on the floor with the phone.

INT. DARIUS'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME

She scoops up the RINGING phone. INTERCUT their reactions.

DARIUS
Hello?

NINA
Hey, what's up?

His response is cool.

DARIUS
Yeah, what's up?

NINA
I'm leaving the day after tomorrow, and I was wondering if you wanted to hook up, have dinner or something.

DARIUS
Got some plans. Sorry.

She's disappointed.

NINA
Oh. I'd like to see you before I go -- maybe lunch?

DARIUS
Oh, damn -- me and Reggie are getting together tomorrow.
(MORE)

DARIUS (CONT'D)
We always have lunch... at this deli on Eleventh Street.

Nina gets the hint.

NINA
Oh. Well, call me if your plans change. If not, well, I guess I'll get with you when I get back.

DARIUS
Uh-huh.

That didn't sound too convincing.

NINA
'Bye.

They both hang up, both pissed off. Off Nina's look --

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ELEVENTH STREET DELI - DAY

Nina enters, looking around for Darius and Reggie.

NINA'S POV

Neither are anywhere in sight.

BACK TO SCENE

She lowers her eyes and exits.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

Darius walks in, examining his mail, and hits the button on the answering machine.

REGGIE (V.O.)
What's up, bruh? Hey, man, you need to call Savon -- that brother's all strung out over Troy. Peace.

The machine BEEPS.

NINA (V.O.)
Hey, Darius, it's Nina.

He stops, staring at the machine.

INT. UNION STATION LOUNGE - NIGHT

Nina nurses a Coke at a table. She glances at her watch.

NINA (V.O.)
I don't know when you'll get this message, but I'm leaving tonight on the Broadway Limited at nine-thirty. I don't know, maybe... maybe if you're around Union Station, you can come down.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

Darius snorts.

NINA (V.O.)
I hope we see each other when I get back.

The machine BEEPS and shuts off.

INT. UNION STATION - GATE - NIGHT

Nina takes a last look around -- no surprise, Darius didn't show. Probably didn't get the message, right? Yeah, right.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

We PAN to REVEAL Veronica standing by the door.

VERONICA
Who was that?

He walks over and slips his arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

DARIUS
Nobody.

INT. UNION STATION - GATE - NIGHT

Nina makes a face and we PULL BACK slowly as she ducks through the door to the train platform, disappearing in a stream of travelers.

FADE TO:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY (NEW YORK)

The unmistakable skyline of Manhattan.

INT. PUBLISHER'S OFFICE - DAY

Nina, dressed to impress, looks across a huge desk at the PUBLISHER. He is looking over her portfolio.

PUBLISHER
... I think you have some talent, but, frankly, I don't think you're ready to be published. You need... experience. Besides, books of photographs are a tough sell. You really have to have a recognizable name to get them off the shelves. I'm sorry.

Nina is crushed.

INT. MARVIN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

A tiny box of a place. Marvin is rummaging through the cabinets in the kitchen as Nina enters.

NINA
Hey.

She slips out of her shoes and jacket. Marvin is preoccupied, looking for something.

MARVIN
Hey. Where are my Alpha Bits?

NINA
I finished the box this morning.

He slams the pantry door shut.

MARVIN
You couldn't eat the damn Trix, could you?

She looks at him like he's crazy. He softens.

MARVIN
(continuing)
I'm sorry -- just a crazy day, that's all.

He heads into the front room.

NINA
Don't you want to know about my day?

Marvin has found a newspaper and is preoccupied again.

MARVIN
Yeah, sure.

NINA
Two more rejections. I've been here two weeks and I'm oh-for-seven. I do have an interview with *Vibe* tomorrow, though.

MARVIN
You could play for the damn Cubs with your average.

She makes a face, then approaches him.

NINA
(mock enthusiasm)
How was *your* day?

He gives her a look, exhaling slowly.

MARVIN
I'm sorry. I just hate to see you... I don't know...

NINA
Wasting my time? Go on, say it.

MARVIN
That's not what I meant --

She sits down.

NINA
You just don't get it. You never have gotten it.

MARVIN
I'll take care of us, baby. You don't have to worry about -- you know, publishing a book, or anything... just get a real job, that's all.

She looks at him hard for a beat, then turns away.

NINA
I don't know why I'm here.

MARVIN
(incredulous)
You don't know why you're here? I mean, what are you telling me? After all those years together... what did we really have?

NINA
(beat)
Time.

He throws the paper down and storms out of the room. She exhales heavily. Feeling a migraine coming on, Nina rubs at her temples, trying to relieve some pressure.

INT. MARVIN'S BEDROOM - MORNING

The alarm clock BUZZES. He stirs, hits the button groggily. A beat, then a realization hits him. He looks at his hand --

CLOSEUP ON HAND

An engagement ring is on his pinkie.

BACK TO SCENE

He sits upright in bed, then comes to his second realization of the day -- he's the only one in it. He drops his head into his hands. We PULL BACK slowly.

FADE TO:

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Another packed Monday night. The emcee, as he does at this time every week, steps on stage. The house lights go down.

EMCEE
(into mic)
Another week... and this is Monday Poet's Night at The Sanctuary.

The cycle of introductions continues. We FIND Wood, Sheila, and Reggie in the back at their usual table.

HOLLYWOOD'S POV

He spots Nina and Josie at a table across the room.

BACK TO SCENE

Reggie notices.

REGGIE
Quit looking at that girl, man.

HOLLYWOOD
You see, Reg, I have these powers over women. I just can't explain it. Sometimes I think it's a curse, but... it's just lucky for you all I use my powers for good and not for evil.

SHEILA
(laughs)
Hey, Wood, take her out once or twice before you bone her, okay?

He turns back away.

HOLLYWOOD
You must have me confused with Darius.

NINA'S TABLE

Josie looks around.

JOSIE
Kinda dead tonight. No fellas.

NINA
Is there a night when you don't have penis on the brain?

JOSIE
Don't even try it. You know you wanted old what's-his-name to be here.

NINA
I happen to enjoy poetry, okay?

Josie gives her the "yeah, right" look.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Nina and Josie are leaving. Wood comes up behind them.

HOLLYWOOD
What's up, J.?

They stop and turn around.

JOSIE
Oh, hey, Wood. I didn't even see you down there.

Nina and Wood nod at each other casually.

HOLLYWOOD
You all leaving out?

JOSIE
Yeah. I'm a little tired.

HOLLYWOOD
I'll give you all a ride. C'mon.

Wood points --

ANGLE ON HEARSE

His hearse is parked at the curb.

BACK TO SCENE

The ladies react predictably.

NINA
[illegible] your car?

HOLLYWOOD
Just like a Cadillac once you get used to it.

NINA
That isn't, like, a working hearse is it? I mean --

HOLLYWOOD
(interrupting)
No, no, no. There ain't been any stiffs in that muthafucka since I bought it.

NINA
(sarcastic)
Oh, well, in that case...

JOSIE
Uh, my car's down the street. So, thanks anyway.

The women nod polite goodbyes and continue up the street, trying to suppress giggles. Wood stands there, watching them walk off.

TWO SHOT - NINA/JOSIE

JOSIE
I should hook you two up.

NINA
I don't want to be hooked up.

JOSIE
You've been back for a month, Nina. You need to rejoin the human race. And Wood's cool.

NINA
I don't care if he's comatose. You try and hook me up, I'mma clock you.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - DAY

A young Eurotrash-looking guy, perhaps too pretty for his own good, sits in front of a white drop posing hard for Nina's camera.

NINA

He takes a deep breath and throws her his best pouty-lipped, pretty-boy model look. She looks from behind the camera, getting irritated.

NINA
(continuing)
It's a *passport*. It ain't the cover of *GQ*.

He takes a deep breath, but out comes the same plastic expression. She can only roll her eyes.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - LATER

Now a baby in front of the standard charcoal-gray drop who will not stop crying. Nina and the parents encourage the kid to lighten up, but he continues balling his eyes out, much to everyone's frustration. Nina steals a glance at her watch.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - LATER

A third CLIENT, a young black man, a bit too cocky for his own good. Nina fusses about, adjusting the camera and lights as he rambles on.

CLIENT
... So this is for my girlfriend, you know, I figured the best thing for her birthday was a picture of her man, you know whatumsayin'?

NINA
(flat)
Great idea.

CLIENT
Yeah, I figure women like that shit... that's cool that you're into photography and shit, when I get back to school I wanna study the shit. I got this partner, see, he's got this police scanner? He listens to, like, police reports and shit?
(MORE)

CLIENT (CONT'D)
We figure when there's an accident, car crash, whatnot -- bam, we roll out to the scene, shoot pictures of the victims, boom-boom, sell that shit to newspapers. On the paper chase tip, clean the fuck up.

Nina ducks behind the camera, thoroughly disinterested.

NINA
(flat)
Say... mo' money.

He throws on his best cool pose, the one he figures will turn his lady on the most, and lets fly with his best Billy Dee Williams impression --

CLIENT
Mo' money.

CLICK.

CUT TO:

NINA - LATER

Sipping from a cup of coffee in the front of the studio, she gazes blankly through the huge window to the street outside. The OWNER, an older white man, pats her shoulder.

OWNER
Good job today, young lady. I think you'll work out just fine.

Her expression, hidden from his point-of-view, indicates how she feels about *that* idea. He disappears, smiling.

INT. BOOK STORE - DAY

We FIND Nina looking over some shelves. She looks up, something catches her eye --

NINA'S POV

Seen through the windows, Darius and Veronica are having an animated conversation on the street in front of the store. It's difficult to tell what the tone of the conversation is. A beat, then they move on down the street.

BACK TO SCENE

Nina pauses for a beat, hurt, then turns back to the books.

INT. TIKI ROOM - NIGHT

Darius is behind the bar fixing drinks. The phone RINGS and another BARTENDER scoops it up.

BARTENDER
(into phone)
Tiki Room.
(beat)
Yeah, hold on.
(to Darius)
For you. Make it quick.

He hands the phone to Darius.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Hello?

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

She sits up in bed, phone to her ear, unable to decide whether to speak.

DARIUS (V.O.)
Hello?

She hangs up, mad at herself.

INT. TIKI ROOM - SAME TIME

He hangs the phone up.

DARIUS
(to bartender)
Who was it?

BARTENDER
(shrugs)
Some girl.

Darius thinks nothing of it.

INT. PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO - DAY

Nina stands by her camera, impatiently waiting for the next client. Wood appears, shocking her.

NINA
Did Josie tell you I work here?

HOLLYWOOD
No, I just came --

NINA
(interrupting)
What are you doing here?

Wood gets cocky, but in a playful way.

HOLLYWOOD
You the photographer, ain't you?

NINA
Yeah, but --

HOLLYWOOD
(interrupting)
Came to get my pictures taken, baby. *Shoot* me, goddamnit. *Immortalize* my shit.

He makes himself comfortable on the stool. She looks at him with amusement.

HOLLYWOOD
(continuing)
How's my light? Is my light good here? Don't make me look bad, now, even though I know that's hard --

NINA
(interrupting; smiles)
Negro, what you want done today?

HOLLYWOOD
Shit. Postcards, eight-by-tens, wallet-sizes... I want the whole *nine*. I want a big-ass poster-size joint I can hang on my wall... of *me*.

NINA
You came down here to spend all that money?

He turns instantly, deadly serious, letting fly with *his* best Billy Dee Williams impression ('cause we all have one) --

HOLLYWOOD
I will... if you just let me buy you dinner.

She is stopped cold.

NINA
What do you want from me, Wood?

HOLLYWOOD
One dinner, that's all I'm sayin'.

NINA
One dinner.

He looks at her expectantly.

HOLLYWOOD
This ain't algebra, now. C'mon.

NINA
(beat)
I'm telling you now -- I refuse to have fun.

HOLLYWOOD
We'll see.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Nina and Wood converse animatedly over dinner in a cozy restaurant. We PULL BACK from them slowly. They seem to be enjoying one another's company.

FADE TO:

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

Darius, stares at his typewriter. He lights a Kool.

CLOSEUP ON PAGE

Totally blank.

BACK TO SCENE

The phone RINGS.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Yeah.

SAVON (V.O.)
Hey, it's me. How's the writing?

He blows a ring of smoke.

DARIUS
(into phone)
A masterpiece of minimalism.
What's up?

SAVON (V.O.)
You know your girl's back in town.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Yeah, I heard. And she ain't my girl.

SAVON (V.O.)
Well, that's good. 'Cause here's something I bet you didn't know.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nina shows off a carved sign that reads "Nina's Studio" to Josie.

NINA
Look what your boy got me.

She appraises the gift disdainfully, grunting.

JOSIE
Wood always was cheap.

NINA
I think it's nice.

JOSIE
Nice is a gift certificate at Barney's. This is cheap.

NINA
I got my own money, thank you.

JOSIE
If it's so nice, why don't you give him some?

NINA
We've only been on two dates.

JOSIE
(teasing her)
That didn't stop you with Darius.

NINA
(a look)
I'll pretend I didn't hear that.
Let's go.

EXT. NINA'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Nina and Josie step out purposefully into the night air. Darius skids his bike to a stop at the curb.

JOSIE
Oh, shit.

CLOSE - NINA

Nina is surprised, but, once again, keeps herself composed.

BACK TO SCENE

He hops off.

DARIUS
Hey.

NINA
Hi.

JOSIE
I think I'll disappear...

NINA
(firm)
Stay.

DARIUS
When did you get back?

NINA
(beat)
A few weeks.

DARIUS
A few weeks. Your phone don't work?

Nina starts to take offense at his tone of voice.

NINA
What is this, a drive-by?

DARIUS
I wanted to surprise you.
(beat)
Surprise.

She says nothing. Josie tries to leave again...

JOSIE
Why don't I just, uh...

... But Nina grabs her arm discreetly, keeping her there. Darius' tone becomes increasingly caustic.

DARIUS
So... what's goin' on? Are you married, pregnant... ?

NINA
Hardly.

DARIUS
What about New York? You have a good time?

Josie and Darius exchange hard looks -- he wants her to vanish.

NINA
Look, Darius, this is really not a good time... we're on our way out...

DARIUS
Cool. No problem. I wouldn't want to get in your way, or anything.

Nina makes a face. Darius narrows his eyes.

DARIUS
(continuing)
So... how's Wood?

She gives him a look. Josie rolls her eyes, tries to leave again, but is stopped once more.

DARIUS
(continuing)
He's got a big mouth, and news gets around.

NINA
Is that so? Well, I don't really think that's any of your business.

DARIUS
Let me hip you to some knowledge you might not have. Even *you* know you don't really want to go out with Wood. He ain't a real person, baby. He's just... one of those people you invite to a party so you can watch him act a fool.

JOSIE
We should really get going...

DARIUS
(to Josie)
Maybe *you* should get going.

Josie looks at him with a *whole lotta* attitude and plants her feet, not going anywhere.

NINA
I'm not your baby, okay? And I can't believe you're gonna stand there and dis your boy.

DARIUS
That's right. You're not. And it ain't a dis -- it's the truth. But hey, I'm just lookin' out. You *will* get your feelings hurt, trust me.

He retreats to his bike and roars off. Conflicting emotions envelope her. Josie watches him go, taking a deep breath.

JOSIE
(sarcastic)
Oh, that was fun. Thank you.

Nina exhales heavily, dropping her head.

EXT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Darius pulls his bike to the curb and jumps off.

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Darius strides down the steps and spots Wood at a table with Sheila. We FOLLOW him over.

DARIUS
What's up?

SHEILA
Hey.

HOLLYWOOD
What's up, Love?

She rises and greets him warmly, registering the look on his face.

DARIUS
Nothing much. Hey, lemme rap to you one time.

HOLLYWOOD
Yeah, man. What's up?

Darius indicates for him to follow. Sheila makes a face.

INT. CORRIDOR

The two men come through the door, facing off in a side hallway. Darius wastes no time.

DARIUS
What are you trying to do, man? I thought we were boys.

HOLLYWOOD
(beat)
Nina? Hey, man, it's all good. Ain't nothin' but a thang, you know.

DARIUS
C'mon, man. You tellin' me you really *like* her? That you want to get to *know* her?
(MORE)

DARIUS (CONT'D)
'Cause if you are, I'll step the fuck back *immediately*. But you know you just wanna tap that ass, so what's the muthafuckin' dilemma?

HOLLYWOOD
I do like her. And I do wanna get to know her. But peep it: all that shit is *moot*. She left you, man.

DARIUS
You ain't ready for The Show, partner. On the square.

Wood shakes his head, laughing.

HOLLYWOOD
Bet. You think you got game, push up on her.

Darius takes a beat, then shakes his head.

DARIUS
You all deserve each other.

He exits.

INT. CLUB PROPER

Darius comes through the door and strolls right past Sheila, saying nothing. Wood enters a beat later and returns to his seat. Sheila gives him a look.

SHEILA
Aren't you all a little old to be fighting over some babe?

HOLLYWOOD
(ruefully)
Ain't never too old, baby.

SHEILA
Let it go, Wood. If you're his boy, you'll let it go.

HOLLYWOOD
She left him. It ain't my fault I'm the Chosen One.

SHEILA
So you're saying it's your turn to hit the skins, right?

HOLLYWOOD
(mock seriousness)
Damn. This ain't about sex. I fuckin' *like* her, okay? I know it's *convenient* for women to think that all we wanna do is bone... but you're *mistaken*. Sometimes we just wanna be...
(long beat)
... held. Cuddle. Now, are you a woman progressive enough to get with *that?*

Sheila chuckles at his ridiculousness.

SHEILA
Yeah, okay. I got your progressive. Just don't put me in the middle of this shit.

INT. MRS. DOWNES' HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

A party at Sheila's mom's house is in full swing. Partygoers include Darius' homies and other well-wishers, MUSIC blares from some unseen d.j. booth, and Mrs. Downes womans the grill in the backyard like a captain on the bridge of her battleship.

INT. FOYER

Sheila throws open the front door to reveal Savon and TRACY POWELL, early thirties. This is unexpected, and Sheila tries to play off her shock.

SAVON
(kissing her)
Hey, baby.

SHEILA
Hey.

SAVON
This is a friend of mine from school. Tracy Powell, Sheila Downes.

They shake ... cordially. She ... waves them both in.

SHEILA
Make yourself comfortable. Food's in the back, make sure you get a plate. There's beer in the fridge...

Sheila and Savon share a glance as they pass.

SAVON
Wood here?

SHEILA
You invited him?

SAVON
Of course I invited him.

SHEILA
Oh, shit.

PARTY PEOPLE - LATER

Darius is holding court with Sheila, Savon, Tracy, and some other folks in another part of the house. We catch him in full philosopher mode.

DARIUS
... What are you talkin' about, you're talkin' about looking cool. Without question, you can't underestimate the importance of looking cool during sex.

SHEILA
You brothers don't get it: the best sex is when you lose control, when you lose your cool, and surrender to passion.

DARIUS
Yeah, but brothers refuse to not look cool during sex. In fact, we refuse to not look cool... *ever*. Which is probably why women get more out of sex than men.

PARTY PERSON #2
Oh, is that so?

DARIUS
(smiles)
Well, I don't know about these fellas here, but *I* can't come nine times in a row.

She looks around incredulously.

PARTY PERSON #2
What woman does that?

Darius looks at her, about to respond, then Reggie jumps in...

REGGIE
Your mother did.

Everybody falls out.

CUT TO:

DARIUS/SAVON - LATER

Off to the side, by themselves.

DARIUS
What's with homegirl?

DARIUS' POV - TRACY

Socializing awkwardly with Sheila and some other women.

BACK TO SCENE

SAVON
Tracy? She's a teacher. She has the class next to mine.

Darius gives him a look.

SAVON
(continuing)
What? I work with her.

DARIUS
"I work with her." What, you got a girlfriend now?

SAVON
She ain't my girlfriend. I work with her.

Darius holds his eyes for a beat

SAVON
(continuing)
What?

DARIUS
You know what.

SAVON
C'mon, man --

DARIUS
C'mon, nothing. I love Troy, too.

SAVON
(defensive)
You told me not to get married. In fact, all you all told me not to get married.

DARIUS
I said that?

SAVON
Yeah.

Darius thinks for a minute.

DARIUS
Oh, yeah, I did say that shit. But I also said the Commodores would get back together. Who knew? The point is, that was then.

Savon gets a little hot.

SAVON
No, the point is you know not of what you speak, my brother. People grow apart, change. But you wouldn't be hip to that because the last relationship you had that lasted more than three months was, uh...
(rubs chin thoughtfully)
... *never*. So advise me about my wife when you got one of your own.

Darius makes a face, knowing he's been put in check.

SAVON
(continuing)
Falling in love ain't shit, D. Somebody talk to me about staying there, dig? Do I love my wife? Hell, yeah. Is she here? No. I brought Tracy because I like her, we get along, she ain't trying to bitch me into deafness, and she doesn't despise my existence. So today I think I'm batting a thousand.

Darius has nothing to add. Off his look --

EXT. HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Wood's hearse pulls up. He exits with Nina and we FOLLOW them towards the house. They are in a playful mood.

INT. HOUSE

Back to the primary group, where Sheila is reminding everyone of how to do "The Spank," a dance from their collective youth.

SHEILA
See, here you go... and remember this?

Tracy joins in.

TRACY
Yeah, but do you remember "The *Monster* Spank"?

She demonstrates the variation, to everyone's amusement. The doorbell RINGS.

SHEILA
Somebody get the door!

Reggie performs "The Prep," and they all laugh some more.

DARIUS
Hold up. Does anyone remember "The Slop"?

ALL
"The Slop"?

DARIUS
Yeah.

REGGIE
You made that shit up.

SHEILA
Go on and do it.

DARIUS
I don't know how. I just heard of it.

REGGIE
This is before TV, right?

They all laugh.

SHEILA
Sorry, baby. Can't do no slop.

DARIUS
I bet your mother remembers. I'mma find somebody in this muthafucka who can slop...

He exits, on a mission to return "The Slop" to the twentieth century. Wood and Nina appear, surprising everyone.

HOLLYWOOD
What's up, black people?

Sheila gives him a not-so-subtle "*No, you didn't* bring her here" look. They mumble greetings. Savon and Reggie exchange some reluctant dap with Wood, and Nina and Tracy are introduced. Everything becomes suddenly uneasy.

TWO SHOT - DARIUS/MRS. DOWNES

In the back of the house, Darius watches with rapt attention as she slops to the best of her recollection.

BACK TO SCENE

Nina senses something is terribly wrong and looks for an exit.

NINA
(to Sheila)
Uh, where's the bathroom?

SHEILA
Down the hall, first door on the left.

She nods and disappears. The rest look at Wood harshly.

HOLLYWOOD
What?

SAVON
C'mon, man. You know D. is stupid for that girl.

Wood says nothing.

INT. HALLWAY

Nina enters the bathroom and closes the door. A few beats later, Darius comes up the hall. We FOLLOW him back to the group.

DARIUS
All right. I got the shit now --

He sees Wood and his mood changes instantly.

HOLLYWOOD
Hey, D.

Darius nods. They shake hands coldly. Reactions all around: "Here we go..."

INT. BATHROOM

Nina checks her make-up in the mirror, taking a half-beat to stare at her reflection. She shakes her head and heads out the door.

THE GROUP

Standing there, nobody saying anything. Nina arrives. She and Darius exchange quick glances. She doesn't look so good.

DARIUS
Hey.

NINA
Hey.

Nina, Darius and Wood exchange glances.

When Nina registers the fact that Wood is gloating, she turns on her heel and heads straight out the door.

HOLLYWOOD
Hey --

Darius shakes his head, saying nothing.

REGGIE
That was foul.

SAVON
That was fucked up what you did, man.

Wood continues the "What did I do?" performance to save face, but knows he fucked up. He curses and heads after her.

EXT. HOUSE - EARLY EVENING

Nina is waiting angrily by the hearse when he arrives.

HOLLYWOOD
What?

NINA
Take me home. Now.

HOLLYWOOD
Look, I'm sorry --

NINA
You embarrassed me! I don't appreciate that shit. And I'm not havin' it, you understand? You and Darius wanna see whose is bigger, do it without me.

HOLLYWOOD
Nina, I know that was wrong. I'm sorry. You have to believe me.

NINA
Don't say shit. Just get in and drive me home. You had potential, Wood, but these days I'm only givin' out one chance, and you just fucked yours up.

Wood goes on the defensive.

HOLLYWOOD
Hey -- you must have known he would be here...!

NINA
(incredulous)
Unbelievable.

She storms off down the street and he storms off back to the house.

INT. HOUSE

He returns to glares from his friends.

DARIUS
(to Wood)
Where's Nina?

Wood snorts, and Darius bolts out after her. Sheila shakes her head.

HOLLYWOOD
What, Sheila? You got somethin' to say? Go on and say it!

She walks by him with attitude.

SHEILA
I ain't got shit to say to you.

Tracy leans over and whispers into Savon's ear.

TRACY
Are your friends always like this?

EXT. STREET - EARLY EVENING - NINA

She stomps angrily down the block. Darius, at a jog, catches up to her.

DARIUS
Slow up.

NINA
I don't wanna talk, Darius.

DARIUS
Lemme give you a ride home.

NINA
I'll find my way.

DARIUS
Lemme call you a cab, then.

NINA
Leave me alone. I'm not in the mood.

DARIUS
Would you hold up, goddamnit!

She stops and spins around.

NINA
Yelling at me tonight is not a good idea.

DARIUS
I'm sorry.

NINA
All the men are sorry tonight, boy. You all 'bout the sorriest bunch of --

DARIUS
(interrupting)
Hey!
(quieter)
I just wanna make sure you get home okay. That's all. We'll walk to the payphone, call a cab, I'll wait, you go, boom. That's all.

She looks at him hard for a long beat, then defers to prudence.

CUT TO:

NINA/DARIUS - FOLLOWING

She walks purposefully down the street. Darius trails a few paces behind her. It's almost comical -- her defiant stride, his cool stroll.

EXT. STREET CORNER - NIGHT

Darius and Nina stand by a payphone silently.

A beat later, a cab pulls up and she jumps in without saying a word. The cab speeds off, leaving him standing there watching her go.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. STREET - DAY - NINA

Nina strides down a busy city block in SLOW-MOTION, 36-48 FPS. Picked out with a TELEPHOTO LENS, she moves in stark relief to the commotion around her. In a sea of people, she appears paradoxically alone...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

Silence. Light only from a lamp across the room. He sits alone on the futon, shirtless and smoking a cigarette, lost in his thoughts. SOUNDS of an argument gradually acquire his attention, and he slowly turns his head to the window.

DARIUS' POV - THROUGH WINDOW

In the apartment directly across the gangway from his, a silhouetted couple are battling viciously. They volley hateful words back and forth without thought and with all malice.

BACK TO SCENE

He registers the fight without emotion.

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Nina lies on the bed, wearing only a T-shirt, concealed from the waist down by a clumsily arrayed sheet. She moves her leg, and an expanse of thigh becomes visible. Nina drags the tips of her fingers across her bare midriff ever so slowly and with the lightest of pressure... enjoying the sensation...

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT

The argument slowly FADES DOWN. Darius, hearing something else, gradually twists his head the other way, [illegible] the NOISES from the other side of the wall: [illegible]

Not animated and fierce like the argument, but soothing, inviting. His next glance is to the nearby cordless phone...

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM

Nina looks to the phone on her nightstand, longing for the contact of another human being, even if it remains only a disembodied voice. She thinks about it for a long beat, decides, and picks it up.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT

He switches the phone on at the instant her call comes through. Their voices are hushed, whispery. INTERCUT their conversation.

NINA
Hello?

DARIUS
Hello -- Nina?

NINA
Yeah. Look... I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I was so mad at Wood, I wasn't fair to you. I honestly didn't know you would be there.

DARIUS
(beat)
No apologies necessary.

She smiles. Her hand continues its motion across her stomach.

DARIUS
(continuing; beat)
I started to write you a poem, but I couldn't finish it.

NINA
Really? Why?

DARIUS
Words... have limitations. Or maybe I just don't know enough of them.

NINA
I move you to words, huh?

DARIUS
(beat)
You move me beyond words, baby.

She pauses, appreciating the sentiment. She lets her hand brush casually across her breast; her nipple stiffens with desire beneath the material...

She makes a decision.

NINA
Darius?

DARIUS
Right here.

NINA
There's a lot we have to talk about.

DARIUS
Yeah.

NINA
(beat)
Can you step?

Off his look --

INT. BLACKSTONE HOTEL BALLROOM - NIGHT

We FOLLOW Darius and Nina as they make their way across the huge expanse of room. Banners trumpeting the "WVON Anniversary Steppers' Set" are everywhere. Early- and mid-seventies r&b MUSIC blasts from the P.A. We SEE legendary VON jock Herb Kent "The Cool Gent" manning the turntables like a veteran helmsman, frequently encouraging the audience and dancers with what remains the smoothest voice in radio.

Darius reacts with a bit of trepidation.

NINA
What's the matter, Old School? Can't you step?

DARIUS
Oh, yeah... Sure.

The crowd is dressed to the nines and a generation or so older than Darius and Nina -- they are greeted with more than a few stares proceeding to the edge of the dancing area. As they look on with admiration, we SEE a multitude of couples practicing the uniquely Chicago art of "Stepping." Once known as "The Bop," and the "Lindy Hop" before it, it is a stylized, balletic, and extremely involved couples' dance that requires the highest level of rhythm, communication, and intuitive interplay; it is the closest thing black people have to a ritualized African mating dance, and is, with the sole exceptions of sex and playing jazz, the ultimate vehicle for both individual and communal expression.

Needless to say, the sight of twenty or so of the most diehard, dangerous stepping couples in Chicago -- any one of which would embarrass Astaire and Rogers into searching for another party -- can be somewhat daunting.

NINA
(grinning)
Don't worry, baby, no rush.
We'll jump in when you're ready.

But wait, 'cause the legendary Herb Kent "The Cool Gent", manning the wheels of steel like a veteran helmsman, chooses *that exact moment* to drop the needle on arguably *the* baddest stepping cut of all time, and a singular, eternally recognizable voice is HEARD loud and proud through the P.A. --

JAMES BROWN (V.O.)
Hit it.

And thus commanded, the JBs begin the groove to "Doing it to Death," a groove so deep, so primal, no mortal can resist its call to motion. God*damn*, is that shit funky...

DARIUS
God*damn* that shit is funky.

NINA
(grabbing his hand)
Aw, suki-suki now! C'mon!

Without pausing to get his response, she yanks him onto the dancefloor, carving out a small space from the throng.

Both are tentative at first, acclimating themselves to the steps and each other, somewhat embarrassed yet persistent.

Soon Fred Wesley is burning through his trombone solo, and they start accepting each other's wordless instructions, start thinking less and feeling more...

Their communication is purely intuitive now, and the two of them bounce effortlessly from unison to counterpoint, from antithesis to synthesis. Eventually their bodies cease abiding the laws of physics altogether, alternately twirling, spinning, splitting, Slopping, and Chili Sauce-ing to a transcendent state of pure, divine, holy, sacred, sensuous, profane, nasty, sweaty Motion.

EXT. LAKEFRONT - NIGHT

The steely Chicago skyline looms behind them as they stare out over a choppy Lake Michigan. The moon is bright enough to read by, the chill in the air is refreshingly brisk and electric with possibilities.

NINA
Now that's what I call a *real* date. The kind my mama always said I should hold out for.

DARIUS
What, we haven't been out on real dates before?

NINA
Bumpin' and grindin' at the Wild Hare hardly qualifies.

DARIUS
Well, you know, baby, ain't nothin' wrong with a little --

NINA
(interrupting)
You've been more clever.

DARIUS
Well, maybe you should listen to your mama.

NINA
Do we ever... listen to our mamas?
(beat)
Look, I wanted to call you when I got back... but I saw you with that girl...

DARIUS
What girl?

NINA
I don't know, some babe.

DARIUS
Veronica? That was nothing. She's gone.

She takes a beat to appraise his sincerity.

NINA
Anyway, I'm sorry. You forgive me?

DARIUS
Nothing to forgive.

NINA
(beat)
Sometimes I think we're so right for each other it scares me, Darius. But you always make me wonder if I'm going too far.

DARIUS
There's no such place. This is a destiny-type thing here, baby. You need to have a little faith.

She searches his eyes for a long beat, then smiles faintly.

NINA
(quietly)
What am I gonna do with you?

DARIUS
(smiles)
What do you have in mind?

NINA
Let's go.

He takes her hand and leads her away.

NINA
(continuing)
So I guess it's a threesome, then.

He looks at her quizzically.

NINA
(continuing)
You, I, and the spirit of the Most High.

DARIUS
(feigning innocence)
Who wrote that shit?

FADE TO:

EXT. LAKE SHORE DRIVE - LATE AFTERNOON

Darius and Nina roll down the Drive on his bike.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Our couple share a table with Savon and Tracy. We catch them in the middle of lifting their glasses in a toast.

SAVON
... And may you have four more happy weeks together.

DARIUS
Skoal.

They all clink glasses and drink, laughing. Darius and Nina share a quick kiss.

DARIUS
(continuing; to Savon)
How's Jamal, man?

SAVON
He's fine. Growin' up too damn fast.

NINA
Do you have any kids, Tracy?

TRACY
Are you kidding? I teach fourth grade -- I got thirty everyday. I don't need none of my own.

They laugh. Darius lights a Kool -- to his surprise, Nina gently plucks the cigarette from his mouth, slides it between her lips, and inhales.

DARIUS
I didn't know you smoked.

NINA
In college, but I quit. Though they do taste better... coming from your lips.

TRACY
(a look)
Hey... !

Laughter. A beat, then Nina gives Darius the "I'm tired" look and he nods.

DARIUS
I think we're gonna push -- it's 'bout that time.

They all bid their goodbyes. Darius and Savon share the universal male glance -- "I'm gonna go get some."

CUT TO:

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT - DARIUS

A look of incredulity.

DARIUS
But why can't I sleep in the bed with you?

She throws a sheet, blanket, and pillow down on the couch.

NINA
I know this is awkward. I just need some time, that's all.

DARIUS
You walk out on me, but you need time.

NINA
C'mon, baby, don't be like that.

DARIUS
Yeah. Sure.

NINA
Well... I'm going to bed.
(beat)
If you need anything, you know, just knock on the door.

DARIUS
I think I'll be okay.

NINA
Okay. Well, goodnight. And thanks for dinner. Again.

He smiles.

DARIUS
Goodnight.

An odd, electric moment passes between them. She turns and Darius watches her disappear into the bedroom, watches her leave the door slightly ajar. And thus begins the dance.

INTERCUT - BEDROOM/LIVING ROOM

Nina sits on the edge of her bed a moment, indecisive. Horny as hell, she marshals her resolve -- and starts to get ready for bed.

Darius resignedly drops down on the couch and runs a hand through his hair. He strips off his shirt and throws his Timberlands on the floor.

Nina looks up, hearing the heavy thump...

NINA
Hey, Darius?

Darius' head spins around...

DARIUS
(quickly)
Yeah?

NINA (O.S.)
You need another pillow?

DARIUS
(disappointed)
No, I'm straight. Thanks.

Nina goes through a drawer of lingerie, discarding garment after garment, mumbling sotto voce an appraisal based on degree of exposure.

Darius casually cranes his neck, trying to sneak a peek through the crack of the door...

Nina slips into her nightgown, a selection just-revealing-enough, and slides into bed. It doesn't appear to bother her that she is still fully coiffed and made up.

Darius watches the light in her bedroom wink out and curses sotto voce, finally convinced tonight won't be the night. But other bodily forces besides his brain are at work -- no, fuck it, they tell him. He gets up off the couch and strides quietly towards the bedroom, determined to get some -- and immediately trips over a chair, crashing to the floor.

DARIUS
(continuing; sotto voce)
Shit!

Nina looks up...

NINA
Darius? You okay?

He picks himself up...

DARIUS
Uh, yeah... just going to the bathroom.

Nina lies back down...

Darius stands in the open bathroom door and flushes the toilet with his foot, staring down the hall.

Nina shifts uncomfortably in bed, rolling on her side...

Darius flops back down on the couch.

She wedges a pillow between her legs...

Darius shifts uncomfortably on the couch, rolling on his side -- a beat later, he wedges his hand between his legs...

Nina lies in bed, wide awake...

DARIUS (O.S.)
Nina.

NINA
(quickly)
Yeah?

PAN quickly to Darius, appearing at the doorway. Off his look --

CUT TO:

By the light of a single lamp, Nina and Darius slow dance to the strains of John Coltrane's "Naima" (the version released on the album *Giant Steps*, recorded 2 December 1959). They cling to one another tenderly.

(NOTE: The following eight scenes are MOS; the record continues over)

EXT. SAVON'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Savon and Troy are having an argument at the front door.

CLOSE - JAMAL

He watches sadly from the car at the curb, waiting patiently for his daddy.

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Darius and Nina listen to another poet on the mic.

CLOSE - HOLLYWOOD

He watches them from the very back of the room. He lowers his eyes, knowing full well he fucked up.

EXT. MUSIC BOX THEATRE - EVENING

Our couple emerge, Nina talking animatedly. Darius just listens, smiling.

EXT. HAROLD WASHINGTON PARK - DAY

We FOLLOW Nina as she runs through the park, being chased by Darius. They are laughing and playful, very much the Hallmark couple (worn Hallmark couples black).

INT. BAR - NIGHT

In between wiping down the bar, Darius scribbles quickly in his notebook.

INT. JOSIE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Josie sits alone on the floor, by the phone. The space is barren, completely devoid of furnishings.

INT. DARKROOM

With the red safelight on, Darius peers over Nina's shoulder at some freshly-minted prints and smiles encouragingly.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - EVENING

He is at his desk, toiling over his typewriter. He stops, frustrated, exhaling heavily. He lights a cigarette and spots a collection of Sonia Sanchez poems sitting on the edge of his desk. He picks it up and opens it.

INSERT - FLYLEAF

Scrawled beneath the title: "Her level is still higher than mine. Enjoy. Love, Nina."

BACK TO SCENE

He smiles to himself, setting the book down. Inspired, he returns to his work with a new determination.

FADE TO:

EXT. STREET - DAY

Nina prowls through the urban commotion with her camera, shooting at random.

NINA'S POV - THROUGH LENS

Working stiffs, young people, other scenes of life pass by -- Nina CLICKS away, FREEZING each image.

BACK TO SCENE

[illegible] crosses the street to a park.

NINA'S POV - THROUGH LENS

CLICK. A young couple on a bench is caught, FROZEN as they demonstrate their affection towards one another -- a shot from the montage at the beginning of the picture.

CLOSE - NINA

Nina stops, taking her eye off lens. She slowly lowers the camera.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

He is standing by his desk, on the phone.

DARIUS
(into phone)
No, look, that's the point -- I don't *get* my mail... yeah, I know it's a black neighborhood... well, can't you send a mailman who can *handle* himself?

Keys turning in the lock, then Nina enters. He looks over, mouthing hello.

She comes into the front room and stands there, just staring at him. He covers the receiver with his hand.

DARIUS
(continuing)
What's wrong?

Another beat. To his total surprise, she proceeds to snatch the phone from his hand, hang it up, and jump him.

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - NINA

In CLOSEUP, we SEE her face upside down and hanging off the side of the bed, caught at the pinnacle of her orgasm. The CAMERA MOVES the width of the bed to Darius, who lifts his head from beneath her dress.

DARIUS
(low)
Was it worth the wait?

NINA
(smiling slowly)
I'll tell you when you're through.

DARIUS
Christ, the things I put up with...

INT. DARIUS' BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

Darius and Nina are asleep in bed. The phone RINGS, waking him up; he speaks low so as not to disturb her.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Yeah?

VERONICA (V.O.)
Darius.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Veronica?

He looks over at Nina, who appears, from his angle, to still be asleep. We SEE that she is wide awake, listening closely. Darius's and Veronica's voices FADE as he climbs out of bed and goes into the other room with the phone. Nina looks over. We HEAR Darius on the phone in b.g., but we can't quite make out what he's saying.

Darius returns a beat later, acting like nothing happened.

DARIUS
(continuing)
I'm sorry I woke you up.

NINA
(staying calm)
Who was that?

He gets back in bed.

DARIUS
Oh, nobody.

NINA
Veronica. You said it was Veronica

Darius makes a face, hidden from her point-of-view. He knows he's not getting back to sleep now...

DARIUS
Oh, did I? Like I said, nobody.

Nina starts building up a head of steam.

NINA
You said it was nothing. You and Veronica.

DARIUS
That's what I said.

NINA
If it was nothing, why is she calling here?

Darius refuses to believe she's tripping like this.

DARIUS
It was a bad dream. Go back to sleep.

That sets her off. She exhales heavily and gets up, snatching the sheet to wrap herself in. Darius grabs at a pillow to cover himself. She heads into the bathroom.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Hey... !
(calling)
Nina. Nina. Come back to bed.

No response. He runs his hand through his hair in frustration.

INT. BATHROOM

Nina tucks her shirt into her jeans and starts piling toiletries into her bag, cursing sotto voce. He enters.

DARIUS
What is your problem?

She sets her jaw, shaking her head.

NINA
You know, Darius, it's not the [illegible] call.

(MORE)

NINA (CONT'D)
It's when you try to play me off -- like, like I'm just anybody... how dare you tell me to go back to bed like this is nothing.

He could end this right now, but continues charging forward...

DARIUS
It is nothing. Like it or not, she was in my life.

NINA
I don't play second to anybody, okay? You wanna have your little affair to remember, do it without me.

DARIUS
You don't talk to your ex-boyfriends? Christ, you're selfish.

NINA
No, I don't talk to them. That's why they're *ex*-boyfriends. And, yes, I am selfish when it comes to you, Darius. I can't help it. You wanna share, fuck a stockbroker.

Her effects thus collected, she storms past him. We FOLLOW him following her into --

INT. FRONT ROOM

DARIUS
For your information, I was telling her it's over -- that I'm with you now.

She stops, turning around to face him.

NINA
I knew this was a mistake. I'm leaving.

DARIUS
No, *I* made the mistake. Wasting my muthafuckin' time with you.

NINA
(firm)
I said I'm leaving.

They look at each other hard.

DARIUS
Then fuckin' leave. Maybe I can get some damn sleep.

She spins on her heel and Slam! goes the door, right on her ass.

DARIUS
(continuing)
And, and don't be slammin' my muthafuckin' door!

INT. HALLWAY

She stomps to the end of the hallway then stops, looking back.

NINA
(beat; sotto voce)
He better open that door...

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT

He leans against the door, cursing.

DARIUS
Don't open the door, D., don't do it, man...

INT. HALLWAY

Nina, now pissed that he hasn't opened the door, stomps down the stairs.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT

He goes to the window.

DARIUS' POV - THROUGH WINDOW

On the street below, Nina angrily stomps up the block.

BACK TO SCENE

DARIUS
I *know* she doesn't want me to come after her.

EXT. STREET - NINA - FOLLOWING

Mad as hell.

NINA
... And he *better* come after me.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT

He throws himself into a chair, pissed. We PUSH IN slowly, as his expression changes to one of resignation, submission. He lurches from his chair.

EXT. DARIUS' APARTMENT BUILDING

He flies out the door, looking up the street, but Nina is a tiny retreating figure. We PAN quickly, following his gaze to his bike parked at the curb.

CUT TO:

NINA

standing at the bus stop a couple of blocks away, still pissed. Darius rolls into view on his bike, bemoaning the fact that now he has an audience.

DARIUS
Nina. Get on the bike.

A few catcalls of "Don't go!" and "Don't do it!" from the crowd. They look at each other a long beat, then she climbs on back. Scattered applause from half the on-lookers, derisive remarks from some, total indifference from the rest.

They look at each other again, neither saying anything, then roar off. Two female BUS RIDERS shake their heads.

BUS RIDER #1
I wouldn't have believed him...

BUS RIDER #2
Hell, no.
(beat)
But he *was* lookin' kinda cute on that motorcycle.

BUS RIDER #1
(sucks her teeth)
Well...

FADE TO:

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Rain falls outside the open window. Nina is on the couch, smoking a cigarette and thoughtfully staring at the ceiling. Darius is reading a magazine across the room. The mood is somber, quiet.

NINA
I never slept with him, you know.

DARIUS
Who?

NINA
Wood. I don't think I even kissed him.

Darius doesn't take his eyes off the page.

DARIUS
What you did before we hooked up is your business.

NINA
I thought you might be wondering.

DARIUS
I wasn't. I learned a long time ago not to ask a question I didn't want to know the answer to.

She takes a long drag.

NINA
Why don't you want to know?

DARIUS
'Cause I don't.

NINA
You don't ask me, I don't ask you, right? Is that how it works?

She stabs out her cigarette. He watches her get up and cross to the window.

EXT. APARTMENT - NINA

She pokes her head through the window, sticking her tongue out to taste the rain. She holds her palms out, collecting slight pools of water, then splashes her face and hair.

INT. APARTMENT

She turns around to face him, looking completely different, refreshed. He looks at her a beat, then reaches for one of her cameras nearby.

DARIUS
Take off your clothes.

NINA
Quit playing.

DARIUS
Who's playing? Take off your clothes.

He snaps a picture of her. She starts to get a little frantic.

NINA
This isn't funny...

DARIUS
C'mon, I've seen what you've got...

She circles the apartment, trying to evade the lens. He stops, setting the camera down.

DARIUS
(continuing)
You don't trust me?

A long beat. The answer is all over her face.

He is clearly hurt. Darius shakes his head, going for the door.

DARIUS
(continuing)
You know, either you're down to take a chance or you're not. You think about it.

Off her look --

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SIXTY-THIRD STREET BEACH - DAY

Darius and Reggie stand on the beach, sipping beers from paper bags and staring out over Lake Michigan.

DARIUS
If you were stranded on a deserted island, and you could only take one of your exes, which would it be?

REGGIE
Completely deserted?

DARIUS
You all are the only folks there. So you can feel free to romp around butt-naked if you want.

REGGIE
Damn, that's tough. Let's see. Stephanie would be in the top three -- only because I could watch her naked ass walk down the beach *indefinitely* -- so long as I didn't have to talk to her.

Darius smiles at the recollection.

REGGIE
(continuing)
Comatose. Maybe Anita... but she'd get on my nerves after about a week. LaShawn is out 'cause she don't give head.

DARIUS
Dig that.

REGGIE
Immediate disqualification.
(beat)
Uh, shit, I don't know. What about you?

DARIUS
That's the thing. With the exception of Felicia, I can't be around any of 'em for more than a few hours at a time.

REGGIE
That was the babe from school, right?

DARIUS
Yeah. Man, did I fuck that shit up. Tryin' to be a player. Dude, I fuckin' *loved* this woman. I left her to... see the world. Never forgave me. Ain't a day go by I don't kick myself in the ass behind that shit.

He exhales slowly.

REGGIE
Can't blame yourself for trying to do what you think is right at the time.

DARIUS
What's right for now? I mean, dig this: I think she's scared. She doesn't want to... I don't know, go all the way, or something. A woman who's scared of commitment.
(pulls at his chin)
Now *there's* a twist.

REGGIE
Dig it.

DARIUS
Here's something else: what's the point? What's all the heartache for, you know? This is fun, right? Happy. Trumpets, and shit. Somebody *school* me.

REGGIE
Gotta know when to say when -- be lookin' at the front door.

Darius changes his mind.

DARIUS
(snorts)
I got too much pain invested to bail now. I ain't goin' no-damn-where.
(chuckles)
Ain't *that* some non-sensical shit.

REGGIE
(smiles)
It ain't quantum physics, man, you know? It's love. Passion. It ain't *supposed* to make sense. It just is what it is. The sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be. Now go home. Make a little love. Tell her she looks pretty, or something. Hey -- it's all to the good.

INT. NINA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Nina is readying herself to go out. Darius enters, wrapping his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her neck.

NINA
C'mon, now. Josie'll be downstairs in a minute.

DARIUS
(smiles)
Suddenly I don't feel like going out anymore.

She breaks away.

DARIUS
(continuing)
Why do you do that when know it pisses me off? I'm trying to show some love here --

NINA
(interrupting)
You've changed, man. All you wanna do is sit up in this damn apartment. It's Saturday night. I am not staying home.

DARIUS
Fine. I'mma go on back to the crib in a minute anyway.

NINA
Lock the door on your way out.

We FOLLOW her into the front room. A BUZZ. She crosses to the intercom and hits the button.

NINA
(continuing; into intercom)
Hello?

JOSIE (V.O.)
(filtered)
It's me.

NINA
(into intercom)
I'll be down in a second.

She snatches her coat from a rack. Darius appears.

DARIUS
Hey.

NINA
What?

DARIUS
What time will you be back?

NINA
Coupla hours. Not late. Why?

DARIUS
I gotta have a reason? The weather's not great. I worry about you. Call me when you get home.

She looks at him skeptically, then relents.

NINA
All right.

She opens the door and heads out.

DARIUS
Hey.

She turns back, annoyed.

NINA
What, Darius?

DARIUS
(beat)
I love you, you know.

NINA
I know.

DARIUS
I mean it.

She softens slightly.

NINA
Goodnight.

The door slams behind her, just as --

DARIUS
Call me... !

He turns and stares out at the rain. Off his look --

CUT TO:

DARIUS

He throws his jacket on and heads through the door, slamming it behind him. We PICK UP his key ring lying on the table in the foyer.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Darius walks to his bike at the curb, turning up the collar on his jacket. He digs in his pockets for his keys, coming up empty.

DARIUS
Shit.

He looks back up to the building.

INT. RESTAURANT

Nina and Josie are at a back table having drinks.

JOSIE
... What's the point, anyway? You're young, smart, you got a career... why be tied into some man?

NINA
I don't like being... I like being with somebody. I like sharing my accomplishments and being a part of his. They just seem to mean more to me that way.

JOSIE
Hmmph. That's too bad.

EXT. PHONE BOOTH - LATER

The rain is coming down harder now as Darius angrily places a call. He waits while it rings, glancing impatiently at his watch, but gets her machine. He slams the phone down, cursing.

INT. RESTAURANT - SAME TIME

NINA
... When do you give up? When do you know that it's just not gonna work, even if you do love each other?

JOSIE
(swallows a mouthful)
Hell if I know. Talk to him, not me.

NINA
We don't talk. We argue.

JOSIE
Well... the "I hate him" rule has always worked pretty well for me.

NINA
The "I hate him" rule?

JOSIE
When I first start going out with a man, I allot him a certain number of "I hate hims." Sometimes three, sometimes five, but never more than seven. Once he makes me say "I hate him" whatever number of times he was allotted... bam, I'm out.

NINA
That's a little harsh, don't you think? I mean, what about Robert? He must have had a hundred.

JOSIE
More.
(beat)
But for every one, he got ten "I love hims."

NINA
(snorts)
You're such a hypocrite. You tell me one thing and do another. What's wrong with being alone?

She drains her glass.

JOSIE
I've *been* alone. It's overrated.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

She opens the door and steps into darkness, fumbling her coat onto the rack. The throws the lights on and walks into the front room --

Where she is immediately startled by Darius' presence on the couch.

DARIUS
Where have you been?

NINA
Shit! You scared the hell outta me. What are you still doing

DARIUS
I asked you a question.

NINA
I've been out with Josie, like I said. Why?

DARIUS
I locked my keys in the apartment. You said a couple of hours, it's now after one. *I've been waiting in the rain* for you to come back --

NINA
(interrupting)
Smells like you've been waiting in a bar --

DARIUS
(interrupting)
I had to get Rick out of bed to open the damn door!

NINA
So you got your keys, why didn't you just go on home?

DARIUS
It ain't about the fucking keys, Nina. You said you'd be home, and you weren't.

NINA
(rolls her eyes)
We lost track of time. Shoot me.

He stares at her in disbelief.

DARIUS
(shakes his head)
The level of disrespect in this relationship... *no woman* has ever treated me this badly.

NINA
(hot)
It's always about you, isn't it? You're just pissed 'cause poor Darius didn't get his daily ego stroke today.

DARIUS
Don't turn this shit around, okay? Don't patronize me -- I am not stupid. That's not what this is about.

NINA
Why are you tripping?

DARIUS
(snorts)
Let's not do this anymore, all right? I'm through playing. Goodbye.

They look at each other for a long beat, then he exits, slamming the door. Off her look --

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SAVON'S APARTMENT - DAY

We FOLLOW him to the door. He opens it to reveal Troy, suitcase at her feet, Jamal in one hand. Savon bends down to hug his son, lifting him up. He leans forward, kissing Troy.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

Nina comes in from the bedroom with an overnight bag of her stuff. Darius, on the futon, doesn't even look up.

DARIUS
(flat)
Shut the door on your way out.

She looks at him a beat, hurt, but turns and exits without saying anything.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Savon and Darius sit on a bench watching Troy play with Jamal.

SAVON
Tracy didn't take it that hard. That's the funny thing. She really wasn't that mad.

DARIUS
Maybe she wasn't as mad as you wanted her to be.

SAVON
(beat; thinks)
It's a possibility.

DARIUS
(beat; motions at Troy)
So what got you over the hump?

SAVON
We remembered the things that got us here in the first place. Then I realized that living without her hurts more than living with her.
(beat)
And my kid.

SAVON
(continuing)
You should get you one of those, man. Might do you some good.

DARIUS
(quietly)
Like to get a wife first.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

He is at his desk, typing furiously, fiercely. He yanks the paper from the typewriter and adds it neatly to a thick stack nearby.

INSERT - TITLE PAGE

It reads, "Gypsy Eyes." Then, "A Novel by Darius Lovehall."

BACK TO SCENE

He stares at it a long beat, letting his anger well up, resentful of the very creation that Nina, now gone, inspired. He opens a bottom drawer, unceremoniously dumps his novel into it, and kicks the drawer shut with a bang. But that isn't good enough. Impulsively, he seizes his typewriter, meaning to heave it across the room, but thinks better of it, settling on slamming it back down on the desk. He [illegible] head in his hands.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

She stares at the phone for a long beat. She picks it up and dials... but slams it back down before the line is connected.

INT. OLD SCHOOL FOOL - DAY

Nina buys the Charlie Parker record Darius played for her.

INTERCUT - DARIUS' APARTMENT/NINA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Darius' place is immaculate for a change. He lies on his back on the futon, alone, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Her place is a disaster. Nina is curled up on the couch, smoking a Kool, all alone.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

She sits at the table writing a letter.

NINA (V.O.)
... There's so much more to say than I can write in this letter. I'm sorry if I ever hurt you. I didn't mean to. And I never meant to drive you away. Please believe me. I wish you'd call me -- maybe we can start this whole crazy thing over again. I think we both can use a second chance.

(beat)
You know, Fate's a funny thing... I used to think I met you at exactly the wrong time in my life. You and I may not be perfect, Darius, but I know now that thought... is perfectly false. Always, Nina.

EXT. NINA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Nina comes running out with the letter, handing it to the postman just before he pulls off.

INT. NINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Nina returns just in time to scoop up the RINGING phone.

NINA
(into phone)
Hello?

STACY (V.O.)
Nina Mosley, please.

NINA
(into phone)
This is she.

STACY (V.O.)
Nina, this is Stacy Wingate from *Vibe*. How are you?

Nina lifts an eyebrow, wondering what this could be about.

NINA
(into phone)
Oh, fine, Stacy. What's goin' on?

STACY (V.O.)
Well, I'm coming in from New York tomorrow on business. I'll be in Chicago just for the day, and I'd like to see you.

NINA
(into phone)
You'd like to see me?

STACY (V.O.)
Yes. A position just opened up that I'd like to discuss with you. Can we get together?

Nina's eyes go wide.

NINA
(into phone)
Uh, let me check. Hold on...

She holds the phone at arm's length and counts silently to ten. She calms her voice.

NINA
(continuing; into phone)
Absolutely.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Nina, dressed to impress, sits across from STACY WINGATE, thirtyish, an extremely poised black woman. Nina's galley is on the table between them.

STACY
Like I told you in New York, your work is extremely strong, Nina. I'm glad Donovan turned me on to you.

NINA
(nervous)
Thank you.

STACY
I have an opening for a staff photographer and I couldn't think of anyone better suited. Are you prepared to move East?

Nina looks around the room... this is her big moment...

STACY
(continuing; smiles)
Let me guess -- boyfriend?

NINA
Sort of.

STACY
Serious?

Nina just looks at her. Stacy smiles to herself -- she's obviously been there before.

STACY
(continuing)
Well, I'll tell you, *Vibe*'s reputation as a visual showcase speaks for itself... so consider this an offer. I'll hire you right now if you want the job.

Nina looks at her...

EXT. DARIUS' APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

A different postman, older this time, pulls up across the street. He sorts through the letters, grabbing the appropriate stack.

INSERT - STACK OF LETTERS

Nina's letter to Darius is on top.

BACK TO SCENE

The postman gets out and crosses the street. Then Fate intervenes again, for at that moment, the three little mail thieves come tearing around the corner. They fly right by the postman, snatching the letters from his grip, laughing and giggling. He yells at them, but is far too old to give chase, and watches them disappear into an alley. He looks around resignedly, and turns back to his truck.

INT. THE SANCTUARY - NIGHT

Applause. Nina steps onstage tentatively and addresses the mic.

NINA
(into mic)
This is, uh... this is something I've been working on for awhile.
(beat)
Funny... what you can do in front of a room full of people... and can't seem to do in front of one person...

A tear wells up in the corner of her eye... as she reads, it drops slowly down her face...

NINA
(continuing; into mic)
It is the color of light, the shape of sound high in the evergreens / It lies suspended in hills, a blue line in a red sky / I am looking at sound. I am hearing the brightness of high bluffs and almond trees.
(MORE)

NINA (CONT'D)
I am tasting the wilderness of lakes, rivers, and streams caught in an angle of song / I am remembering water that glows in the dawn, and motion tumbled in earth, life hidden in mounds / I am dancing a bright beam of light...
(beat)
I am remembering love.

She steps away from the mic, collecting herself. The audience is silent, stunned by the emotional directness of the words and the nakedness of her recital.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

It's raining. Savon, Troy, Reggie, and Sheila are present, sitting on the floor, smoking and chatting AD LIB. The phone RINGS and Darius scoops it up.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Yeah?

JOSIE (V.O.)
Darius? It's Josie.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Yeah. I know.

JOSIE (V.O.)
Look. Nina told me not to tell anyone this, but... fuck it, I thought you should know.

DARIUS
(into phone)
What is it?

JOSIE (V.O.)
She's leaving town tomorrow on the noon train. She took a job in New York.

DARIUS
(into phone)
What am I supposed to do about this?

JOSIE (V.O.)
I don't know. Maybe you should see her off.

DARIUS
(into phone)
Maybe not.

JOSIE (V.O.)
Well, you do what you wanna do. I just thought... I should tell you.

They both hang up.

SHEILA
Who was that?

DARIUS
(beat)
Nobody.

SHEILA
(tentatively)
How's your girl?

DARIUS
Not my girl anymore. Love TKO, baby.

TROY
Can I add my two cents, Darius?

DARIUS
Oh, the black *Honeymooners* are gonna give me marital advice now? Why not?

TROY
Love is overrated. I mean, I love my husband dearly -- but he's also my best friend. I think heavy-duty *like* is more important.

DARIUS
I guess if you two knuckleheads can stay together, there's hope for all of us.

He lights a Kool and goes to the window, staring out contemplatively at the rain -- the same composition from when we first see Nina.

EXT. UNION STATION - DAY

Josie's car pulls up to the passenger loading area in front. Nina and Josie get out and heft Nina's bags from the trunk. They stand there, hugging.

INT. DARIUS' APARTMENT - DAY

He sits on the futon, scribbling in a notebook. He drops it in disgust, unable to concentrate.

DARIUS' POV

The picture that Nina took of him sits in a frame on the bookshelf nearby. The man's soul captured.

BACK TO SCENE

He looks at his watch. He then jumps up, heading for the door. If he hurries...

CUT TO:

SERIES OF SHOTS of Darius riding his motorcycle like a madman. He skids to a stop in front of the train station and dashes inside.

INT. UNION STATION - DAY

Nina walks to the train porter, shows her ticket, and climbs aboard.

We FOLLOW Darius to the departure information screen, then on as he breaks into a full out run towards the track. He flies past the porter, ignoring him, and heads onto --

INT. TRAIN PLATFORM - DAY

Baggage handlers are busy stowing the last few carts of luggage. Darius runs down the length of the train, jumping up, peering desperately into the compartments for any sign of Nina.

INT. TRAIN - NINA

She is shocked, seeing him charge up the platform. She [illegible] for a beat, then gets up, crossing awkwardly over [illegible]ing next to her.

INT. TRAIN PLATFORM

Darius spots her getting up, and jogs over to meet her as she appears in the doorway. Breathing heavily, now he doesn't know exactly what to say. Nina goes immediately into self-defense mode.

NINA
If you're gonna be chasing after babes in train stations -- you should probably quit smoking.

He wants to laugh but can't.

DARIUS
Chasing after you's a harder habit to break. Next time'll be your turn.

NINA
(beat)
You never answered my letter --

DARIUS
(interrupting)
What letter?

NINA
Darius, the train's leaving. I gotta go.

She takes a deep breath as the emotions start playing across her face...

DARIUS
Goddamnit, woman, I need you! Can't you see that? Don't you know that?

Her eyes tear. She fights like hell not to cry... she breathes deeply, not knowing what to do or say, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

NINA
I have an opportunity, Darius. I can't let it pass. You, of all people, should dig that.

DARIUS
A job? They'll be other jobs, baby.

NINA
Either you're down to take a chance or not -- you did say that, right?

He gives her a look.

DARIUS
I meant me.

NINA
It was still good advice.

DARIUS
(beat)
Nina, marry me. Today, now. We'll go right now.

NINA
You're crazy.

DARIUS
(dead serious)
Yeah. I am.

The PORTER looks up and down the platform. Personnel are clearing out.

PORTER
All aboard!

Nina looks at him hard for a long beat, but her mind is made up.

NINA
I have to go... but I'll be back.

DARIUS
When?

NINA
(beat)
I don't know when. When it's right. Just... have some faith.

Darius takes a beat, drawing a breath.

DARIUS
Faith, huh? Funny thing about faith -- that muthafucka's always getting tested, you know?

NINA
(smiles)
I know.

DARIUS
Besides, you put a scratch in my Hendrix record, and I want my shit replaced...

She grins. The porter ambles over with a worn expression. He clearly has seen more than his share of train station farewells.

PORTER
I'm sorry, ma'am, we have to go...

She nods. Darius grabs her around the waist and holds her close to him, tightly. He holds her face in his hands tenderly, lightly pressing his lips to hers. She then climbs back on board, giving him a parting glance. She mouths the words "I love you"...

NINA'S POV - DARIUS

He presses two fingers to his lips and sends her a cool, airborne kiss...

He allows himself just a second to watch it go, then spins around quickly and starts back up the platform.

INT. TRAIN

Nina returns to her seat. She looks across the aisle.

NINA'S POV - MAN

A man has his six-year-old daughter almost standing on his lap. Smiling, she plays with her daddy's face, then kisses his cheek happily.

CLOSE - NINA

She looks at the couple hard, drinking in the scene: one human being expressing an unconditional, wholly accepting love to another -- an image nearly identical to her photograph. Alone once again, she finds herself pondering a familiar question -- the possibility of what can be -- and yearning for a resolution to that most human of tensions.

FADE OUT.